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"PAPA," SAID ESTHER, WITHOUT HESITATION, "I WILL NEVER GIVE GERALD UP!"

A FIGHT FOR A WIFE.

[A NOVELETTE.]

CHAPTER I.

UNDISCOVERED as yet, alike by Bank Holiday tourists and the world of fashion, the pretty village of Cazedon stands, in primitive solitude, at the head of one of the sweetest of the Devonshire bays. Bold headlands tower on either side, and, fronting the sea, rocky crags and boulders lie heaped one upon the other in massive and majestic grandeur, as if bidding defiance to the tumultuous waters that swell at their feet.

The village itself lies back half-a-mile from the shore, but, here and there, a few houses have been erected fronting the broad sweep of the English Channel, and in one of these Gerald Leigh sits, lazily smoking his morning pipe.

The room is fairly comfortable, although not overstocked with furniture. A useful carpet, of sober but artistic design, covers the floor; there are three or four chairs of different shapes, a cosy

lounge, and the walls are covered with exquisite steel engravings, framed in choice oak. On one side of the fire-place is a shuttered window, on the other the recess is filled from top to bottom with wide shelves, literally groaning beneath the burden of hundreds of oddly-assorted books. The table is strewn with papers, most of them evidently manuscripts, but, apparently, the occupant of the room is in little mood for work; his gaze wanders restlessly out on the narrow path that skirts the side of the house.

Presently his eyes light up with a gleam of expectancy, and, throwing open the window, he receives a pile of letters from the rural postman. Little need is there to probe his secret; his face flushes, and the tell-tale love-light kindles in his eyes, as his quick glance detects a dainty pink envelope, addressed in a lady's handwriting to "Gerald Leigh, Esquire, Mount Cottage, Cazedon." It is from Esther, and, opening the envelope with his paper-knife, he reads eagerly the loving words which the sweet, frank-hearted girl has written to him.

"Gerald Leigh," the young fellow says aloud, putting the treasured missive carefully away, "you are a lucky dog, and no mistake!" and, to

all outward appearance, his estimate is a correct one.

There is something about him that holds one's attention. His forehead is broad and intellectual, his head well-shaped, and covered with close, curling brown locks. The features, though irregular, are pleasing and finely-cut. The lips are, perhaps, a trifle too compressed, but they are in strict keeping with the resolute chin. Before long, however, you find that the chief attraction lies in the man's eyes. Grey they are in colour, a soft shimmering grey that changes naturally into a bluish tint; and they are fringed with heavy lashes, so that it is only occasionally one can realise their great depths. For the rest, he is long and straight of limb, with firm well-developed muscles, which speak of systematic exercise in the open air, and his hand, you notice, as he takes up his meerschaum, is white and shapely.

The son of a wealthy merchant, life to Gerald thus far had been literally a land flowing with milk and honey; and when, a short time previously, Esther Stormont, the only child of his father's old friend, confessed her love for him and promised to be his wife, his happiness seemed complete.

Early in life Gerald, to whom ill-health was irksome, embraced literature as a profession, and for some time had been in the habit of spending a portion of each year at Cazedon, for the purpose of revising and correcting his manuscripts.

On this particular day, however, he could not work. In vain he took his pen, and strove to concentrate his attention upon the task before him. Esther Stormont's merry blue eyes glanced up from every sentence, until, finally, with a joyous laugh, he seized his hat, and stepped out through the open window, with the intention of indulging in a good long ramble.

It was glorious June weather. A few gossamer clouds, just sufficient to relieve the sameness, flecked the blue sky, while a gentle sea-breeze rippled the waters at the foot of the cliffs, and tempered the warmth of the sun's rays.

Gerald paused for a moment to admire the beauty of the rugged scenery, and then, selecting a path that would lead him across the cliffs to the west of the village, he set off with long, quick strides, singing aloud from very happiness. He was in the highest spirits, for, at that moment, there was not a single cloud to mar his joy. Young, rich, handsome, and loved by a beautiful girl, what better fate could any mortal desire! On for miles he trudged over the rocky path, his strong limbs feeling no fatigue, until at length, coming to a pretty, sheltered cove, he stretched himself out under a huge boulder, and, lighting his pipe, gave himself up to day-dreams of a rosy hue.

Brilliant pictures he imaged in his fruitful brain, on that glorious afternoon, when all around him breathed one grand harmony of joy and beauty. On his imaginary canvas there appeared no half-lights nor shadows; he used no sombre tints, no darkened colours; everything was gay and sparkling, for Gerald was happy. Once only, in his boyish days, had he experienced the misery of a bitter grief; he had yet to learn what terrible agony a strong man can suffer and still live.

Presently, under the influence of the sun's heat and the hushed stillness, broken only by the rhythmic murmuring of the waters, he fell asleep, and when he awakened, some two hours later, he jumped to his feet with a cry of surprise.

The transformation scene which nature had prepared for him was marvellous in its intensity. He had fallen asleep in the calm and sunshine of a summer afternoon; he awoke to confront a storm of tropical magnitude. Heavy masses of black clouds obscured the sky; the angry waves, as if released from a forced constraint, were rapidly gathering impetus, to hurl themselves in mad fury against the iron-bound coast, and presently a sullen reverberation rolled out above his head, as if giving the signal for the onslaught.

Buttoning his coat tightly across his chest, Gerald struck into the path, and began toiling upward. The ascent was difficult in the extreme. Torrents of rain poured from the leaden clouds, violent gusts of wind tossed him bodily across his zig-zag course, while, ever and anon, a vivid streak of lightning revealed how precarious was his foot-hold. But Gerald was strong and knew the path well, so that, by dint of plodding resolutely onwards, he at length reached the summit of the cliff. Holding fast by a rock he turned and gazed at the wild waste of waters.

Suddenly, a little to the west, out of the way of the village, and near to the terrible rocks, known to the natives as "The Nutcrackers," he caught sight of an object which caused him to lose all thought of his own discomfort.

Without a moment's hesitation, he took the nearest route to the village, and ran forward at full speed, heedless alike of hardship and danger. The place seemed deserted; the furious storm had driven everyone within doors; but, guessing that a godly company would probably be assembled at the "Admiral Nelson," he rushed up the street and into the village inn.

Fortunately the room was filled with men, who gazed in consternation at Gerald's unceremonious entrance.

"Quickly, men," he cried, "I have just come from the coast; there is a ship abreast the Nutcrackers; I have seen her distress signals. Run,

someone, and wire to Glenavon, perhaps the life-boat is still in."

An active young fellow slipped out, and the rest looked at each other, with faces of dismay. They were strong, hardy men, inured to danger, and bold as lions. There was not a coward amongst them; but to get float in such a storm as this was almost certain death and they thought of their wives and bairns.

Philip Rayne was the first to break the awkward silence, and a braver man never tugged at an oar. He was a broad, deep-chested man, perhaps sixty years old, though at present the only sign of age was his snow-white hair. The brightness of his eyes was undimmed, and he carried his head erect, as he had done thirty years since. In Cazedon itself, Philip's word was law, and the men waited anxiously for him to speak.

"If there are lives to be saved this day, abreast the Nutcrackers," he said, solemnly, "there are lives to be lost." A murmur of sympathetic approval went round the little group, while the old man continued. "We have not one boat that would live two minutes in a storm like this. However, our duty is plain; live or die we've got to fetch those folks, if possible. Now, mates, look alive; get the roughest ropes you can find, and remember, a broken strand most probably means a man's life."

As if by magic the room was cleared, and hastily swallowing some brandy, which the landlady insisted on his drinking, Gerald followed Philip Rayne to the coast.

The news of the doomed ship had spread like wildfire, and the shore was already thronged by dozens of hardy men, who stood bawling their own uselessness. Even to Philip's untrained eye it was apparent that none but the stoutest life-bat could survive for an instant in that boiling, seething mass of waters. Every instant the excitement grew more intensely agonizing, and presently news reached the little crowd that the Glenavon lifeboat had already started for another wreck.

They can see the ship now—a moderate-sized barque, drifting perilously near to the treacherous rocks, and presently a feeble cheer is raised as Philip Rayne, with a rope fastened firmly around his body, plunges into the sea, in a mad attempt to reach her. Anxiously they watch him, fighting desperately, every inch of his way; but his progress is slow, and finally they drag him in, exhausted and almost lifeless. Another and another take his place with like result, and then Philip's son—called young Philip, to distinguish him from his father—essays the hopeless task. Meanwhile the wind has dropped, which gives him a great advantage, and he strikes out boldly. Foot by foot he wins his way, and the people on the barque can be perceived gesticulating wildly, as it seems that his efforts are about to be crowned with success, when suddenly he disappears, and the people on shore begin to pull in vigorously. A broken arm and an ugly gash across the head show where he has been struck by a plank from the ship, and Andrew Barnes voices the general sentiment, when he exclaims, mournfully,—

"It's no use, mates, we can't do any more. There isn't a better swimmer in Devon, nor in Cornwall either than Philip Rayne, nor a stronger, unless, maybe, it's young Phil, and where they fail it isn't likely any of us will get through."

All this time Gerald had stood, a silent but eager spectator; now, to the wonder of the crowd, he flung off his coat and vest and proceeded to remove his boots.

"Have a care, Mr. Leigh," exclaimed old Rayne, who had recovered consciousness. "You will only sacrifice your life without the slightest chance of doing anyone the least good."

Gerald smiled gratefully.

"Never fear, Mr. Rayne," he answered. "I have counted the cost. The risk is great; but it is no more than you yourself ventured, and I must make an effort to reach those poor fellows."

The others now attempted to dissuade him, but Gerald was not to be denied, and finally, with an encouraging cheer from the

crowd, he plunged into the boiling waters. Gerald was a good swimmer, and the force of the hurricane having luckily spent itself, he had much less difficulty in making his way than those who had preceded him. Still it was a desperate enterprise and one that required all his strength and skill.

The situation of the vessel, too, had changed, and to the practised eyes of those on shore it was evident that in a few moments she must be dashed to pieces on the Nutcrackers. Every eye was strained, gazing alternately on the swimmer and the doomed barque, when suddenly a despairing shriek rent the air, and the vessel, lifted clear out of the water, was hurled with tremendous force upon a spur of the rocks. A succession of wild, piercing cries, and then all was still; the angry sea had claimed its prey.

Gerald was about to turn back, when a black object, tossed hither and thither by the tumultuous waves, attracted his attention, and with renewed vigour he swam towards it. Presently he perceived it was a man, clinging desperately, but with powers already weakened, to a plank. The villagers saw him also, and a great shout went up when Gerald managed to reach him.

But the danger was by no means over. The shipwrecked man, faint and weak from exposure, could scarcely support himself, and Gerald's powers were fast failing. Slowly, very slowly, they approached the shore, where a dozen pairs of strong arms were ready to drag them into a place of safety, and amidst enthusiastic cheers they were carried down to the Admiral Nelson.

By the time the messenger who had been despatched to Mount Cottage returned with a change of clothing, Gerald was little the worse for his immersion, but the stranger, on the advice of the local practitioner, had been put in bed, and was now sleeping soundly.

"Is there any danger?" Gerald asked, when the doctor came down; "the poor fellow seemed fearfully weak."

"None whatever," replied Mr. Day, genially; "a good night's sleep and he will be as fresh as a daisy in the morning."

Having given the landlord a few directions, and made inquiries after young Phil, Gerald proceeded to Mount Cottage, little dreaming what important consequences remained to be evolved from his heroic action.

CHAPTER II.

THE morning after the storm rose so beautifully clear that Gerald felt almost inclined to believe that the events of yesterday were a figment of his own imagination. Just, however, as he had settled down to his morning's work, the trim landlady announced Mr. Lancelot Nesbitt, and in a few minutes he was shaking hands heartily with the man he had saved, at the risk of his own life, from a watery grave.

The new comer was tall and fair, like Gerald, but his figure was slighter and more loosely knit together. His face was clean shaven, but he wore his hair, which contained a slight tinge of red, rather long. His eyes were of a blue colour, but hard and cold, and placed rather too near together; with this exception he would decidedly be termed good-looking.

He spoke well, and his voice was soft and pleasing.

"Allow me," he said, with a smile, "to introduce myself in a less awkward fashion than I did yesterday. On that occasion I fear you must have found me a very stupid companion."

"Well!" answered Gerald, laughingly, "you certainly had very little to say for yourself, though I must admit you clung to me in the most touching manner."

Lancelot Nesbitt smiled again. "Ah!" he said, "Mr. Leigh, I perceive you are a man of humour, which makes my task all the easier. I have come to thank you for saving my life, as well as for playing the Good Samaritan afterwards," and he glanced comically at the suit of Gerald's clothes, in which he was attired. "But believe me, Mr. Leigh," he added, with sudden

earnestness, "though my tongue is not good at making phrases, I am none the less sensible of your heroic conduct, and I really do thank you from my heart."

"Oh, doubtless you would have done the same thing," interposed Gerald, "had our positions been reversed, and there was not so very much danger after all. But we will leave that subject if you please, and unless you have any objection, discuss one that should be of greater interest to you at present. I suppose all your effects went down with the ship. If so—"

The stranger marked his embarrassment and laughed gaily. "That is a true Englishman," he said, "you will save my life, lend me your clothes, pay my hotel expenses, and lodge me in your own house for a twelvemonth, but because you think I am a gentleman, you blush to offer me money. Fortunately I can put you at your ease. Though by birth an English gentleman, I am at present a naturalised American, and having lately made a few lucky deals in Wall Street, I detoured on a trip to the old country. According to medical advice, my system needed a strong tonic, so rejecting the regular liners, I induced the captain of that ill-fated ship to take me as a passenger. Speculators, you are aware, have little loose cash as a rule, but I brought a few hundreds in notes and gold, and they have gone to feed the fishes. However I should most probably have lost it on your Stock Exchange, so it really matters very little. I must cable to my broker to sell out a little more."

"Well!" exclaimed Gerald, hesitatingly, "I don't profess to know much about business matters, but unless you have friends here, you seem to be, at least, for a short time, very awkwardly fixed. Unfortunately, I have to run over to Torquay this afternoon, to visit an old friend who is seriously ill, but if you will accept a temporary loan, I will write you an introduction to my father, and he, no doubt, will willingly advise you, how best to act."

Lancelot thanked him warmly, but not effusively, for his proffered aid, and Gerald liked him all the better for his reticence. There was plenty of time before the latter's train started, and the American was easily persuaded to stop to lunch, after which they walked down to the station together.

"Remember," Gerald said, as he got into the train, "do not hesitate to use my letter directly you reach London; my father will be only too pleased to do anything he can for you."

Nesbitt bowed, and as the train steamed slowly out from the station a curious smile played over his features. "Well!" he murmured to himself, "if that were a fair specimen of an average Britisher this would be a pleasant country to live in. But I'd wager my last dollar that the old man will be as hard as nails, and suspicious as a lawyer. I can just fancy his expression when he listens to the yarn of the notes and gold, gone down with the wrecked ship. However, he will tide me over the present difficulty, for the youngster's sake, and it will go hard if I don't manage to plant that 'Laughing Valley' scheme in the right quarter before I've finished."

Sauntering down to the booking-office, he took a first-class ticket for London, and replaced his lean purse, with a rueful smile. "It's always a great mistake," he muttered, "not to do things in proper style, one never knows what may happen."

At Whitechapel Junction a second passenger entered the compartment, and Lancelot looked at him critically from the corners of his eyes. He appeared to be between fifty and sixty years of age, with white hair and an iron-grey beard. His cheeks were lean, and there were deep furrows across his brow, but his eyes were sharp, like a ferret's. A massive gold chain stretched over his white waistcoat, and a superb diamond glittered on one of his fingers. An acquaintance worth cultivating Lancelot decided, and he acted accordingly.

Few people could be more fascinating in their manner than Lancelot Nesbitt when it suited his purpose, and although his present companion was wrapped in an armour of icy self-reserve, yet

he could not resist his fellow-passenger's overtures, and before long they were chatting freely.

"And so you are going to call on Robert Leigh," said the old gentleman after a pause, "how strange! he is a sort of friend of mine; you had better come with me, my carriage passes his house. I am Reuben Stormont, pretty well-known in the City, I assure you," and the speaker chuckled.

"What!" exclaimed Lancelot, with real interest this time, "are you Reuben Stormont, the man who scored so heavily off Uncle Sam in '79? That move of your's nearly beggared me," which, seeing that Lancelot was, at that precise period, a beggar in reality, might be regarded as a slight of the imagination.

Reuben Stormont laughed loudly. "Oh! they remember me in Wall-street, do they? Well, it was a neat stroke, I confess."

Lancelot allowed him to gloat over the recollection of his own cleverness, while he rapidly scanned the money article of the *Times*, which his companion offered him. Suddenly he pursed his lips, and gave vent to a peculiar whistle.

"Anything the matter?" questioned Mr. Stormont brusquely.

"Oh! no, it's all right, I daresay, but I have been out of the world so long that it gave me a shock to find *Arizmas* quoted at par. I thought that bubble would have burst long ago, and sold out at eighty-seven."

Mr. Stormont's lips gave an almost imperceptible twitch, but he spoke calmly. "What do you mean? Is there anything wrong with the stock?"

Lancelot's lips tightened instinctively. Here was a glorious opportunity, and he inwardly blessed his happy foresight in taking a first-class ticket.

"My dear sir," he said, slowly and weighing his words well, "an hour ago we were utter strangers to each other, and even now there is no reason why you should trust me. But you have treated me very courteously; you are a friend of Mr. Leigh's, and I will offer you a piece of advice which I would give to no other man living. If you have any interest in *Arizmas*, do not delay a single instant when you reach London, but give your broker orders to sell out at once. In twenty-four hours it may be too late, they cannot possibly keep it up much longer. Do not ask any questions, but take my advice and sell out immediately. Personally I have no interest in the matter; I am only desirous of serving you."

Reuben Stormont's face betrayed the conflicting emotions of his mind. According to private intelligence the stock, in which he had a large capital invested, might be expected to rise twenty or thirty higher, but Lancelot appeared so earnest that his own confidence was shaken, and he almost determined to take his fellow-passenger's advice.

"Where do you put up for the night?" he asked abruptly.

"Upon my word," responded the other frankly, "I haven't the faintest idea, for until my broker advances remittances, I am, so to speak, on my beam ends."

"If you are not afraid of your own prophecy, come and stay with me."

Lancelot could scarcely conceal his delight at this turn of events, but he managed to preserve his composure and acknowledge his thanks in appropriate language.

Swiftly the train sped onward, bearing these oddly-assorted allies, until at length it steamed into the station, where Mr. Stormont's carriage was in waiting.

"Your letter to Mr. Leigh will keep until to-morrow," he said to Lancelot, as the coachman gathered up the reins, "we shall be just in time for dinner, and, as luck has it, there will be no one but ourselves and my daughter Esther, so that you need not dress. The other matter can wait, nothing can be done until the markets open."

Lancelot bowed. "You are very kind," he murmured, "but for your own sake I implore you not to undervalue my warning."

"Never fear, I will give my agents orders early

in the morning, but now we are at home, let us leave business matters for a time."

The coachman pulled up his horses, and in a short time Lancelot found himself inside Reuben Stormont's London house, and being introduced to that gentleman's daughter Esther.

Esther Stormont was a dainty little maiden with large blue eyes, fair curling hair, and a complexion beautifully clear. Her mouth was small and perfectly shaped, and she had a lovely dimple in her white chin. She welcomed her father's guest with a warmth that for the moment rather surprised him, though her eager exclamation directly afterwards, revealed the thoughts flashing through her mind.

"Lancelot Nesbitt! why that is the name of the gentleman whom Gerald Leigh saved from drowning. Was it really you, Mr. Nesbitt? Oh! I am so glad; it is like a page out of a story book," and she clapped her hands with delight. "But how careless of me," she continued, "I quite forgot you poor people were hungering for your dinner. Never mind, give me your arm, papa; Mr. Nesbitt shall tell us all about it afterwards," and she threw him a sunny smile, which brought the colour to his cheeks, and made his heart beat more rapidly.

She did not refer again to the subject during dinner, but afterwards, when they entered the drawing-room, she called Lancelot to her side, bidding him recount the story of his adventures, and when he described Gerald's heroism, the blue eyes flashed with enthusiasm. "Oh!" she cried, "that was generous, noble of him. I am so glad, Mr. Nesbitt, because Gerald is a very old friend of ours."

When Lancelot Nesbitt, after smoking his last cigar, went upstairs that night, his brain was filled with the picture of a little flaxen-haired girl, with big blue eyes and rosy mouth, and he muttered to himself, "I am really very sorry, Mr. Gerald Leigh, to upset your arrangements, but by fair means or foul, I am going to make Esther Stormont my wife."

CHAPTER III.

Two months had elapsed since Lancelot Nesbitt's first appearance in London, and Gerald, who had returned to Cazedon, was still busy with his literary work when a letter from his sister Marie induced him to cut short his stay in the little fishing village and proceed to London.

Esther had written to him occasionally, and had mentioned how strangely she had been brought in contact with Mr. Nesbitt, and what an agreeable acquaintance he had proved.

Lancelot had written also, reiterating his thanks, and enclosing a cheque for the loan he had temporarily accepted.

Hitherto Marie Leigh had rarely referred to the interesting stranger, but this last letter was full of him, and Gerald easily guessed from the wording of her communication that she was ill at ease.

What it all meant he could not understand, but he knew his sister's natural shrewdness and her alarm was reflected in his own mind. He packed up his things with feverish haste, and as he drove down to the little station a strange pre-entiment of coming evil lay like a heavy weight upon his heart.

To such an extent had his agitation increased that it was with a feeling of actual relief he drove up to his father's house, and found everything apparently in its normal condition. Marie met him in the hall, and the troubled look in her eyes vanished as he held her in his arms and kissed her. They were very dear to each other those two, and as the girl looked up into her brother's face the strange ideas conjured up in the busy brain, seemed for the first time fanciful and unreal.

But Gerald's very first question brought back the look of perplexity to the fair face. "Where is my father, Marie? In his room? I must go and see him, it seems ages since I saw him last."

"You forget, dear," his sister answered, "he did not expect you, and has gone out."

"But it's dinner-time; surely he has come back by this."

Marie laughed, it seemed to him a trifle awkwardly. "We have already dined," she said; "had you arrived ten minutes earlier you would have met papa at the door. But do not look so downcast," she added mischievously, "there are plenty of provisions left. Now go and get the stains of travel off, and Mrs. Markham shall prepare a nice appetizing little dish, while I myself will do the honours of the table."

She pushed him lightly away, and ran off to give her instructions to the housekeeper, while Gerald, more serious than ever, went thoughtfully to his room.

"Now, Marie," he exclaimed an hour later, "tell me all about it. What is the mystery which is making you so miserable?"

"Upon my word," she responded, "I really do not know. It seems very absurd, but though apparently there exist no definite grounds for apprehension, yet I am horribly afraid of I know not what."

Gerald remained for some time in deep thought. "If I did not know, Marie, what a fund of common-sense there is in that little head, I should attribute your fears to a girl's foolish fancies. But in this case I am sure there must be some foundation for your alarm. Surely you can give me some clue! Has it," he spoke hesitatingly, "anything to do with our father?"

"Yes," she cried, with a sudden outburst, "poor papa has seemed strangely ill at ease lately, and more especially during the last few days. He is constantly going into the City, and looks worried and anxious, especially after one of Mr. Nesbitt's visits."

"What! the fellow whose life I saved! He seems to have taken up his abode here, Esther appears to see a great deal of him."

Marie laughed bitterly. "Why! he is constantly at her house; did you not gather as much from her letters? Oh! Gerald, I know it is very, very wicked, but sometimes I almost wish he had found a grave in the ocean, on that fearful night."

Gerald gazed at his sister in undisguised amazement. "Poor little girl," he said, pityingly, "you must indeed have been sorely tried. But what is the man's fault? he seemed pleasant enough to me."

"Ah! that is the point. Lancelot Nesbitt is pleasant enough when it suits his purpose; he has smooth words and a lying tongue, but the man is essentially false and cruel, and, mark me, Gerald, he intends doing us some terrible mischief."

"And has he succeeded in imposing on Mr. Stormont?"

"That I cannot say. I only know that the two are hand in glove, as the saying has it. But, you are aware, I never held a high opinion of Esther's father, and, perhaps, he has need of such a man in his business. People do say this Nesbitt prevented him from losing thirty thousand pounds, though in what way I do not profess to understand."

"And our father; what is his opinion?"

"That is the most complicated part of all. He dislikes him I know; and yet he is constantly with him. But there is another matter which concerns you more nearly," and she looked her brother steadily in the face: "This man whose life you saved at the risk of your own is in love with Esther, and is determined to marry her. The first time I saw them together I guessed his secret, and that is one reason why he hates me. But, hush! that is papa's step, do not say a word before him at present."

The door opened, and Robert Leigh entered the room. For a moment he failed to note Gerald's presence; but, as the younger man rose from his chair, a proud, happy smile suffused his face, and, laying his hand affectionately on his son's shoulder, he exclaimed, "Ah, Gerald, my boy! so you have come back to us. Welcome home, my lad! both for Marie's sake and mine. I am getting an old man, Gerald, and am very poor company, I'm afraid, for your sister. She has been losing her roses lately; you must endeavour to coax them back again."

"You are a dear, silly goose," the girl cried, kissing the old man's cheeks lovingly. "Of course I am glad for Gerald to be at home again, but I

will not have you slander yourself in that way." She placed her father in his easy-chair, and seated herself on a low stool at his feet.

One glance at his father's face revealed to Gerald more clearly than an hour's argument how well founded one portion, at least, of his sister's apprehensions had been. The old man sat toying with Marie's dark-brown tresses, and glancing occasionally at his son, with an air of affectionate pride; but Gerald, watching closely, perceived with pain that his smile was forced and unnatural, and that beneath the surface there lay doubt and mistrust, only partially concealed. The conversation was confined to indifferent topics; no one made the slightest allusion to Lancelot Nesbitt, though in reality he was the object of all their thoughts.

Presently Marie withdrew to her room, thinking that when alone her father would be more communicative.

Gerald readily understood the motive, and made no attempt to detain her. But, although they sat chatting for nearly an hour after her departure, the old man made no sign, and, finally, he, too, rose from his seat. "You must excuse me, my boy," he said, apologetically; "but I am not so strong as in former days, and I generally go to my room now in good time."

Gerald wished him good night, and, finding himself thus deserted, determined that he would stroll down to his club. "It is just possible that Merton may be there," he thought, "and should there really be anything in the wind, he will let me know."

It was still comparatively early, and fortune, for once, smiled on the young fellow, as, at the door of the club, he overtook Horace Merton.

"Gerald!" exclaimed the latter, in surprise; "you here! I understood you were feeding fishes down the Channel somewhere," and he shook him heartily by the hand. "But come along, we shall find ourselves in possession. All the fellows are gone, except Perkins and Mavor, and one or two of that set. By the way, that confounded individual you went cruising for in some outlandish bay has got himself accepted here—old Stormont's influence, I suppose. But, seriously, Leigh, it would have suited your book just as well if the gentleman in question had been left to negotiate those breakers by himself."

"Why! has he made himself disagreeable?"

"Oh, no! on the contrary, he lays himself out to win everybody's good opinion, and with a very fair measure of success. Old Stormont in particular is infatuated with him, and consults him about all his financial schemes. But, considering the good turn he did him, perhaps that is not to be wondered at."

"Ah!" exclaimed Gerald, with a show of interest, "what is that story! I have heard it mentioned, but know nothing about the actual facts."

"Well, it isn't much in your line, but Reuben Stormont, who does an enormous amount of business on 'Change, invested a considerable sum—thirty thousand pounds I heard upon good authority—in some American stock which looked like turning out a splendid investment. Acting on Nesbitt's advice, and in direct opposition to his own judgment, Stormont cleared out every penny. Within twenty-four hours there was a panic in the City, owing to adverse news from America; everybody rushed to sell, and several people who had been buying in largely were utterly ruined. I, myself, lost five hundred over the deal."

"This Nesbitt, then, is really a shrewd fellow."

"Certainly, thus far he has been singularly fortunate; but, speaking frankly, I distrust him. My own opinion is that he is playing a deep game, and, if you follow my advice, you will leave his speculations severely alone."

Gerald's astonishment betrayed itself in his face. "My dear fellow!" he exclaimed, "I have not seen the man since he left Cazedon."

"Then you know nothing of what is being rumoured?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"Of course the report may be true or false, but, in Town, they say that your father is one of his principal supporters in the Laughing Valley Silver Mine."

This statement excited Gerald's liveliest apprehensions, since he knew that on his retirement from business Mr. Leigh invested all his money in Consols, for the express purpose of keeping his fortune intact.

"Thanks, Horace," he said presently, "for your information. To-morrow I will ask my father if there be any truth in the rumour."

As they stepped into the street some time later, Merton directed Gerald's attention to a short, shabbily-dressed man lurking in the shadow of the wall, but so placed that no one could enter or leave the building without being seen.

"This is the second time I have observed him," Horace said. "I wonder what the fellow wants."

"Very likely he is hungry; he does not look over-fed. Here, my man," raising his voice, "get yourself some supper," and Gerald slipped a coin into the lounge's hand.

The man touched his ragged cap. "Thank you, sir," he said earnestly; "you are a real gentleman and no mistake," and he slouched off.

Horace laughed. "That's a cheap compliment, Gerald, but I wonder what the rogue's game really is; I have half-a-mind to find out."

Was it chance or fate, that led Gerald to seize his friend's arm, and turn laughingly away? He had performed a trifling action, merely provided a fellow-creature with a night's food and shelter, and yet had he not prevented Horace from following his caprice, that one act would have saved him untold misery. At that moment he stood, as it were, at the parting of the ways; on the one hand safety; on the other destruction; and he blindly chose the latter. One is almost tempted to believe that we mortals, after all, are but the veriest playthings of fortune.

Gerald walked home, thinking deeply over Merton's statements, but little dreaming that the ragged stranger he had befriended held the fortunes of his family in the hollow of his hand.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. LEIGH did not appear at breakfast on the morning following his son's return. He sent a message to the effect that he was unwell, and would breakfast in his own room. Almost unconsciously Marie glanced at her brother, and found that he was looking at her. To each the same thought had occurred, though neither cared to shape it into words. Was Mr. Leigh for some unknown reason not desirous of meeting his son?

Marie broke the silence. "Did you notice Gerald, how greatly poor papa has altered? To me he scarcely seems the same man."

Gerald nodded silently, and the girl continued "He did not, I expect, give you any information last night?"

"No, but after he retired, I went down to the club, and luckily met with Merton. By the way Marie, I always thought Horace was an ardent admirer of yours."

The girl blushed a rosy red. "Never mind that now, dear; tell me what information you gathered from Mr. Merton; he is, I know, a very shrewd observer, and has such a host of connections, that very little of importance escapes him."

Gerald smiled gloomily, "I trust some of his friends have misled him in this case," he answered, "though I fear his suspicions are not far from the truth."

In her eagerness Marie jumped up. "Oh! Gerald," she cried, "do not keep me in suspense; what is it he is afraid of?"

The girl was strangely excited. Loving her father with a deep devotion, his changed habits of the last few weeks had affected her painfully, and in her ignorance of the world she had begun to harbour all sorts of wild conjectures.

Gerald's reply, therefore, came as an actual relief to her over-taxed mind, and lifted a heavy load from her heart.

"If Merton's idea is correct," he said, "and I am inclined to share his views, our father has got mixed up in some risky speculation which may cost him a good deal to get out of, especially as he knows very little about stocks and shares. On

the other hand, if the affair turns out a success, which, as he is evidently acting in concert with Mr. Stormont, is not unlikely, he may double his fortune. Anyhow, its only a monetary transaction, so you need not bother your little brain about it. With our father it is different. He has probably been over-persuaded, and the novelty of the situation has unsettled him. Now to men like Nesbitt and Mr. Stormont, these matters are meat and drink; they live on them, and that reminds me I have one or two letters to write, and then I'll call and pay my respects to Esther."

He kissed her affectionately, bade her dismiss the whole affair from her mind, and went off to his own room to smoke a pipe and think over the situation. In his own mind he had no doubt that he had accurately divined his father's conduct, though the motive puzzled him considerably.

Mr. Leigh was essentially a safe man; he had built up an ample fortune by a steady application to legitimate business, and it seemed so foreign to his nature to embark in anything of a risky character, that Gerald was altogether puzzled.

Presently, as the young fellow sat, dreamily watching the grey smoke-wreaths curling upwards he remembered his sister's remark the previous evening, that Nesbitt was in love with Esther, though he would have laughed at the idea of tracing any connection between that fact—if fact it were—and his father's strange behaviour. At the time, he paid but little attention to the statement; now, however, it returned again and again with strange persistency.

"Pshaw!" he said at length, "I am growing childish. What if the fellow does love her? Who could help loving her, with her beautiful face and bonny winsome ways?"

Suddenly his face grew ashen white, and his heart turned sick with fear, for a terrible thought had flashed across his mind. Suppose—no, he would not suppose, he would thrust the notion away from him, anywhere out of sight, it would drive him mad to harbour such a thought. He got up and paced the room with quick, irregular steps.

Good heavens! what a fool he had been to give himself such a fright! As though the thing could be possible! He would go now, this very instant and see her; perhaps she had heard of his return, and was even now waiting to welcome him.

He took his hat and went out hurriedly, as though unwilling to lose a single second more. Presently, however, his steps slackened; it would never do to rush into Esther's presence in this excited state, and he smiled at his own eagerness. He stopped to speak to one or two people, whom he knew, and just as he paused at the corner of the street leading to his club, he felt a hand on his shoulder, and turning round saw his God-father, Sir Thomas Braund.

"Back again then, Gerald," exclaimed the latter heartily. "I almost thought you were gone for good, this time. Are you in any particular hurry?"

"No!"

"That's right, I want to have a talk with you. Who is this Lancelot Nesbitt you have pitchedforked into the City?"

Gerald started.

"Upon my word," he answered somewhat impatiently, "I don't know. I rescued him from drowning down at Cazedon, and gave him a letter of introduction to my father. I gathered from his remarks that he was an American speculator, but in truth I know nothing about him or his affairs. Why do you ask?"

"A long time ago, my boy, I believe I promised to look after you, give you good advice, and all that sort of thing, and I want to put you on your guard. Unfortunately, you know your father and I quarrelled long since, so I cannot speak to him, but I do not like the way he is getting entangled with that fellow and Reuben Stormont. One pigeon between two hawks, Gerald, my boy, stands a good chance of being plucked. Give him a hint, will you? Ah! there is Stormont, are you going to stop?"

"Yes, I wish to speak to him, but do not fear, I will remember your warning and act upon it—"

unless," he muttered to himself "it be not already too late."

Sir Thomas gave him an expressive nod, and hurried off; he had no great regard for Reuben Stormont, nor desire for his company.

"Good morning, Mr. Stormont," exclaimed Gerald, as Esther's father came up. "This is a pleasure I scarcely expected, though I intended calling at your house. Esther, I trust, is well."

Mr. Stormont put up his gold-rimmed eyeglasses, and stared stonily at the speaker.

"Yes," he said deliberately, "my daughter is quite well. I fear, however, you will not find her at home, though I may be mistaken. But you will excuse me, will you not? I have an important engagement that must be kept;" and before Gerald recovered from his surprise, he was gone.

The young man walked on slowly, his brain perplexed afresh by this frigid reception. What did it all mean? he asked himself wondering. Was this a proof of the accuracy of his sister's statement? Could it be true that Esther's love was already slipping from his possession? He touched lightly the precious missives he always carried with him, and the action, simple though it was, made him realise the folly of his momentary suspicion. No; whatever calamity fate held in store for him, Esther, he felt sure, would remain true to her plighted troth.

Meanwhile, he had reached the house; and sending in his card, was ushered into the drawing-room, where presently he was joined by Esther and her mother.

Had a doubt still lingered in his mind, it would have been banished by one glance at the girl's face. A vivid blush mantled her beautiful features, and a joyous light leaped into her eyes, as he entered the room.

"Oh, Gerald," she said presently, "what a surprise you have prepared for us! I thought you were still at Cazedon. I will scold Marie for keeping her news so secret; she never breathed a word."

"Do not blame Marie," the young fellow said lightly; "she knew nothing about it until the cab stopped at the door. By the way," turning to the elder lady, "I met Mr. Stormont on my way; he scarcely expected I should find you at home."

"No, we intended to go out, but Esther is growing so abominably lazy, that we rarely get off."

"The truth is," exclaimed the girl merrily, "papa exhausts all the energies of the family. You have no idea how energetic he has become since he met Mr. Nesbitt. Oh, I was delighted when papa brought him home. I made him tell me all about it; and he described those horrid rocks, and the waves, and the people standing on the shore, so vividly that it seemed quite real. Fancy saving a man's life in that way, Gerald! I should be so proud if I were you."

The girl's enthusiasm was so genuine that Gerald's face flushed with pleasure; and he was about to make some reply, when Mrs. Stormont interrupted,—

"And how strange that my husband should have met with him in the train! It seems almost like a special providence" — Gerald groaned inwardly—"for my husband says he is extremely clever, and I am sure he makes himself very agreeable—does he not, Esther?"

"Yes, mamma, I think he is a very nice, well-mannered young man, and vastly entertaining; but never mind Mr. Nesbitt now—Gerald, you will stay to luncheon!"

"Certainly, Esther, of course Gerald will stay," echoed Mrs. Stormont; and the young fellow, nothing loth, readily acquiesced.

Mr. Stormont evidently was not expected to put in an appearance; and in Esther's society Gerald's spirits mounted so high that, when he bade the ladies farewell, he had half forgotten the stockbroker's strange behaviour and his own fears. His fit of despondency had worn off, and he was prepared to look the future steadily in the face.

On one point he was determined. Averse as he felt to interfering, he would, if possible, get some explicit declaration from his father at the very first opportunity.

After dinner, Marie, to whom he confided his intentions, pleaded a headache and withdrew; and Gerald induced his father to accompany him to the smoking-room.

The introduction of the business proved more awkward than he had anticipated; but at length he said, as if casually,—

"I suppose Mr. Nesbitt brought you my note?"

"Yes."

"Of course, you understood I knew nothing about him, that he was merely a chance acquaintance, whom I thought you might assist?"

"Oh, he did not require my assistance; he came here as Stormont's friend."

Gerald whistled softly.

"Does it not seem injudicious," he exclaimed, "for Mr. Stormont to give his confidence to a perfect stranger?"

"Oh, trust Stormont; he never makes a mistake. He has used the fellow to some purpose, I can tell you."

"At any rate, I am glad it is Mr. Stormont, and not you, who has confided in him. There are some ugly stories afloat."

Mr. Leigh turned pale, and his lips twitched nervously.

"About Nesbitt?" he said. "Do not believe them; it's pure envy. The man has a perfect genius for business. Do you think he could deceive Stormont?"

"I can only repeat the opinion of others," Gerald answered firmly, "that he is a designing knave; and, for my own part, I would not trust him with a penny."

Mr. Leigh made no reply to his son's remark, only he muttered to himself, as if unconsciously,—

"It cannot be true, it would be too terrible;" and presently rising, he exclaimed feebly, "My boy, you have given me an awful shock. I cannot say more now, I must go to my room and think; but Heaven grant, for your sake and Marie's, that I have not been mistaken."

He walked to the door with unsteady feet, and Gerald, without a word, led him to his own room.

There could be no further room for doubt; it was evident that, for some mysterious reason, his father had become deeply involved in Lancelot Nesbitt's financial schemes.

CHAPTER V.

"To make hay while the sun shines" is a proverb that, under various guises, does duty in many climes; and Lancelot Nesbitt, as he lolled back in his luxurious chair in Maughan-street, on the night succeeding Gerald's return, was a splendid example of its wisdom.

Taking the cigar from between his lips, he glanced round his well-appointed room with an air of approval.

Lancelot was a man of luxurious ideas. The thick, soft Turkey carpet which deadened the sound of one's footsteps, the richly-upholstered furniture, the costly hangings, the luxurious lounge, the magnificent chandelier, with its glittering pendants, the pictures in their massive gilt frames—all these things pleased him.

Some men are born with an instinctive appreciation of luxury and comfort, and Lancelot was one of these. They were to him an outward and visible sign of a good social status, of the power of wealth, before which he bowed himself down and worshipped, as in the presence of a deity.

On this particular evening he was in the highest spirits. He had fought a hard fight; he had played a desperate and risky game, and unless something in the nature of a miracle intervened, success was assured to him.

But Lancelot had very little faith in miracles, and although he never made the common mistake of being over-confident, he yet felt that he might justly congratulate himself on the results of his schemes. At least, he might safely indulge in a well-earned rest, and he sipped his wine with an air of quiet satisfaction.

Since the night of his introduction to our

reader, his appearance had improved wonderfully. He wore a general air of prosperity, and it suited him. His clothes were fashionably cut and in good taste; a heavy gold guard crossed his vest, and a diamond ring glittered on his finger. Fortune, perhaps as a recompense for her recent scurvy trick, was evidently dealing very graciously with the naturalized American; and Lancelot accepted the gifts of the fickle dame, not vaingloriously, perhaps, but with the feeling that they were the due rewards of his own peculiar merit.

Thus far, indeed, everything had prospered with him. Already he was the trusted adviser and confidant of one whom, rightly or wrongly, men judged to be the craftiest and most unscrupulous of British speculators. Certainly, as yet, his share had been but the jackal's pickings, but shortly he would be in a position to hunt on equal terms, and the prospect exhilarated him. He was not generally given to castle-building, but for once his thoughts got beyond control.

It was truly a tempting vision that his imagination pictured. He saw himself the owner of an enormous fortune, a princely estate, and last, though not least, he saw Esther Stormont presiding at his table, attracting everyone by her beautiful face, and winsome manner.

So completely was he absorbed in his reverie that someone twice knocked loudly at the door before he answered, and a trim, neat servant maid appeared.

"If you please Mr. Nesbitt," she said hesitatingly, "there is a person downstairs who wishes to see you, and will not go away."

Never a breath of suspicion crossed his mind, as the girl made her statement, never once did he dream how rude a shock was already threatening his airy fabrics.

"I am afraid, Lizzie," he said with a smile, "your definition is a just a trifle vague. A person, you know, is a term which covers a wide area. What is it—for as yet I do not even know the sex—like, this persistent visitor, who remains obdurate even to your blandishments?"

"Well, sir," the girl responded quickly, "the person is a man, and I have shut the hall-door in his face, lest he should take a fancy to the things hanging up inside."

Lancelot laughed aloud.

"You have really a genius for description, Lizzie; there is nothing vague about that. Tell him I am engaged, particularly engaged, and cannot see him. You may add that I have no loose cash about me, absolutely none, not even a penny piece," and he laughed again.

The girl withdrew, and Lancelot, dismissing the subject from his mind, resettled himself in his chair, but presently the servant returned, bearing in her hand a scrap of dirty paper.

"I was obliged to come back," she said with a frightened air, "the man swore dreadfully, and told me to give you this," and she handed him the paper.

Lancelot took it with reluctance; he was beginning to feel annoyed at this interruption, but though outwardly he remained calm and composed, a single glance at its contents made him feel sick and faint. Here was an unexpected checkmate, when he thought the game was in his own hands.

His brain whirled, and making a strong effort to collect himself, he said with a laugh,—

"Why didn't the fool send up his name at first? It's all right, Lizzie, it's a man I employed to procure me some private information. Let him come up, though he might have waited until the morning."

When the girl had gone Lancelot looked anxiously at his reflection in the glass. The colour had returned to his cheeks, his eyes were bright and unclouded, and his mouth hard and firm.

"So far good," he murmured, "the slightest trace of fear will undo everything. Coolness and confidence are the watchwords."

Involuntarily his thoughts drifted back to the Devonshire Bay, with its grim rocks, and wild, howling waves, when he stood face to face with death and made no murmur. In his extremity then he had found a friend, with strong arms and an iron will who had pulled him out of the very jaws of destruction; now his case was equally

desperate, and he must fight it alone, but he did not despair.

Presently he heard the sound of approaching footsteps; the door was pushed open, and his unwelcome visitor entered the room.

During the course of his chequered career Lancelot had been placed in many delicate situations, and had long since gained perfect control over his features.

Rising from his chair, he gazed at the intruder with well-simulated astonishment.

"Now, my man," he said harshly, "what have you to say to me that affects Mr. Stormont, for I gather from your scrawl that your information relates to that gentleman."

For a time the stranger made no reply; he was busily engaged in examining the room with a critical, but apparently admiring air.

The two men presented a striking contrast. Lancelot, sleek and prosperous, harmonized completely with his surroundings—the other, well! a less fastidious critic than the American might with truth have regarded him as an unpleasant object.

He was ragged and dirty; he had taken off his shaggy cap, revealing a tangle of coarse, unkempt hair. His threadbare clothes were patched and darned with all kinds of oddly-assorted materials, while his dilapidated boots could have served but as a sorry protection to his feet. Hunger and want had pinched his face, and left it wan and haggard; but his eyes gleamed brightly, and their expression did not belie the firm, resolute chin. He appeared in fact to be what is commonly called an ugly customer to tackle.

Having completed his leisurely survey of the apartment, he transferred his attention to Lancelot, and stared at that gentleman from top to toe.

Next advancing to the fireplace he looked carefully at his own reflection, and as if the performance afforded him intense amusement, burst into a loud laugh.

Meanwhile, Lancelot had been rapidly revolving in his mind his own plan of action.

His first idea had proved a failure, and he was quite wise enough to abandon it. He had made a bad move, but it need not sacrifice his game, he would wait for his adversary to begin.

Presently the stranger moved towards the cigar-box.

"You are not very hospitable, Mr. Nesbitt," he said; "if you were my guest I should say 'Try a smoke, old fellow.'"

"Perhaps you would like a little brandy to keep it company," Lancelot remarked sneeringly, and he pointed to the decanter.

"That's better. I thought you had forgotten your manners; now I begin to be more comfortable," and pouring out a glass of brandy he coolly seated himself and lit a cigar. Then as if the joke struck him afresh, he rose and took another peep at the mirror.

"Now, who would think," he exclaimed meditatively, "to look at me, that I had discovered a gold mine!"

"Judging from appearances it does not pay a brilliant dividend."

"No!" with an impressive gesture; "here I am homeless, ragged, and hungry; I've only had one meal this week, when a kind-hearted swell gave me a shilling—and yet for the last fortnight I've had my pick as it were, right on top of a gold mine!"

"Then this gold mine is in London?" laughed Lancelot carelessly.

"Ah!" exclaimed the stranger reflectively, "this London is a mighty curious place. Sometimes you find gold mines, sometimes," with a peculiar glance at his companion, "silver mines, but mostly, I think, cold stones and hard crusts."

Lancelot was becoming impatient. Recognizing that he had either to fight or to treat with this man, he resolved to make a beginning, so lazily blowing a cloud of smoke into the air, he said—

"Now, look, Dick Carter, the sooner you stop that tomfoolery the sooner I shall learn what it is you want."

"There," exclaimed the other, still addressing himself, "That's just what I expected all along. What I said was, 'Give him time, Dick, my boy.

Just at first he'll hardly know you in that precious togger, but he's wonderfully cute in Lemuel'—oh! I beg pardon, I'm sure, but the old name seems more familiar—"and he'll recognise his old partner!"

Lancelot winced, but he answered calmly, "What is it you want?"

"Want!" echoed the other with sudden fierceness, "I want money—money for food, and clothes, and lodgings."

"Why not add drink? Dick, that's worth all the rest to you."

Dick Carter glowered sullenly. "No!" he said, "Lemuel—if you're counting on that, you are mistaken; see my glass is still nearly full. Besides I have come across a good thing, and I'm not going to throw a chance away. Listen to me, Lem; I'm going to be a gentleman; not a real tip-top swell like you, but I'm going to have fine clothes, and live well, and always have money in my pocket. I've been knocked about a good bit lately, and I'm going to settle down."

"On the proceeds of your gold mine?"

"Yes! prosperity has dulled your wits a trifle, Lemuel. Don't you understand? You are my gold mine."

"That's it, eh! You propose to levy blackmail?"

"Call it what you please," answered the other doggedly, "as I look at it, the case is this. We are both scoundrels, though you are much the cleverer one," and he waved his hand towards the costly articles that adorned the room. "Now, what I intend is, that while you prey upon society, I will prey upon you."

Even in the midst of his anxiety, Lancelot fairly laughed at the fellow's audacity. "A delightful arrangement truly," said he, "but what if I object?"

"You won't object," answered Dick contemptuously, "for the best of all possible reasons; you dare not."

Lancelot leaned back with half-closed eyes, thinking deeply. He was not the man to blink disagreeable facts, and he faced this one steadily. Presently he looked up, and Dick Carter, watching him narrowly knew, that for good or ill, his resolution was taken.

"I have listened patiently, Dick," he said, with deliberation, "to your remarks, and I am going to try and imitate your admirable frankness. First, however, let me make one trifling correction. Your memory must have served you falsely when you said I should not dare to object. That, however, is a detail, let us get to the real business. To a certain extent I am in your power—that is to say, you can spoil my schemes, and damage my future prospects. You perceive I am perfectly open with you. Having achieved that, your weapons are exhausted, for you will discover nothing that will place me within the power of the law. With you, my friend, matters are different. That Roden Brothers' affair, I believe, is still unsettled, and ought to provide you with board and lodgings for at least seven years. You do not like the subject? Well! we'll change it. Speaking frankly, I have no wish to drive you to extremities, and am willing to make an arrangement with you; but it must be on my own terms. Accept or reject them as you please, I will not shift one hair's breadth."

"Speak out," grumbled the other sulkily, "what do you propose?"

"On the understanding that for the next three months you preserve strict silence concerning my affairs, I will give you five pounds a week. At the end of that time, but not before, either of us shall be at liberty to reconsider the arrangement."

"Give me the first instalment, Lem," answered the other, "and I'll go."

Lancelot counted five sovereigns into the outstretched hand, and opened the door.

"Good night, Dick," he said, pleasantly, "I can trust you to keep your word, because," and he lowered his voice, "I have the whip hand, and don't forget it."

When his visitor had departed, Lancelot poured himself out a glass of brandy and drank it quickly.

"Ugh," he said, with a shudder, "that's an awkward business well settled. In three months I

shall be old Stormont's son-in-law, and Dick may do his worst."

CHAPTER VI.

ONE result of Dick Carter's visit was, that it hurried Lancelot's plans. Standing, as he did, upon the brink of a volcano, which might burst into flames at any moment, was decidedly unpleasant, and he determined to effect his purpose as speedily as possible.

Another matter troubled him too; people were beginning to ask troublesome questions. The extent of Mr. Stormont's speculations had long been a subject for comment, but since Lancelot's advent, they had increased enormously, and according to rumour, some of these later transactions were of a decidedly shady character.

To this in itself Lancelot did not object, since it tended to throw Mr. Stormont more than ever into his power, but on the other hand it brought the American into greater prominence than for the moment he desired.

He had not called on Mr. Leigh since Gerald's return, but the young men had met at the club, where Lancelot renewed his protestations of gratitude, which his companion accepted at their true worth.

Gerald meanwhile found matters becoming more and more uncomfortable. Every day his father went into the city, and returned at night worn and harassed, alike in mind and body. It was pitiful to watch the deepening of the lines in his face, and the constant look of anxiety in his eyes.

Once Gerald attempted to turn the conversation towards Lancelot Nesbitt's financial schemes, but the elder man checked him. "It is useless, my boy," he said, "I understand your meaning, but if you please, we will not discuss the subject. No amount of talking will undo what has been done for good or ill," and Gerald had to be content.

One evening, just as they were sitting down to dinner, a letter which had been brought by a special messenger, arrived for Mr. Leigh.

The old man took it in his hand, and turning it round, looked at the address. "Dear me," he exclaimed musingly, "I seem to know this writing, it has a strangely familiar appearance," and opening the envelope, he added with a start, "why it is from Braund!"

At the last remark Gerald glanced anxiously at his father. The two men he knew had once been firm friends, but an unhappy quarrel originating in some trifling matter, had never been made up, although the worthy knight had upon several occasions expressed a desire for a reconciliation.

Gerald guessed instinctively that something unusual had taken place, and a sentiment of impending calamity seized him as his father began to read the note.

Marie, too, realised the significance of the event, and her eyes sought Gerald's with a look of apprehension.

Meanwhile Mr. Leigh was perusing the letter with a dazed expression. Twice he went through it without appearing to grasp its import. Then he looked with a beseeching air upon his children, and fell helplessly forward, with a feeble moan.

They raised him tenderly, and Marie kissed the poor man's face, and called on him again and again with loving words to answer her; but the stricken man made no reply, only occasionally he uttered a half-inarticulate cry of anguish.

"Take care of the letter, Marie," Gerald whispered; "it contains bad news, and send someone for Dr. McCarthy. Let Mrs. Brooks come to me."

Marie nodded silently, and, with one loving look at her father, turned and hastened away.

They carried him to his own room and placed him in bed, and Gerald sat by his side chafing his hands, and searching eagerly in his face for a sign of recognition.

The sick man lay quite motionless, and an on-looker might have thought he was dead, so quiet he was; save that now and again a low cry, like that of some stricken animal, passed his lips.

Presently the door was gently opened, and,

with noiseless tread, Dr. McCarthy entered the room. He was a tall, portly man, of dignified appearance, and had attended the Leigh family for many years.

Gerald rose as the doctor entered, and the latter, giving the young man's hand a sympathetic clasp, proceeded to examine his patient.

Turning round, he asked, "Has your father received some bad news; some mental shock?" and the latter whispered, "I fear so."

After concluding the examination, he motioned to Gerald, who followed him quietly, leaving Mrs. Brooks in charge of the unhappy sufferer.

"Now, my boy," exclaimed the physician, in kindly tones, and laying his hand on the young man's shoulder, "take me where we can have five minutes' uninterrupted conversation," and Gerald led him to the library.

Dr. McCarthy's face looked very serious, and his tones were grave and measured, "I am going to speak plainly," he said, "because I know you are a brave lad, and it is best you should learn the truth at once. I fear I can give you but little ground for hope. Your father has had a tremendous shock, and is in a state of total collapse—both mentally and bodily. There is a chance, a very slight one, that he may rally; but it is so feeble that I scarcely know if I am right in alluding to it. At any rate, summon all your courage and prepare for the worst. He will lie in his present state for the next six hours, then, most likely, he will regain consciousness, and linger for a few days. If he were a younger man—but why speculate on the impossible. I will call in the morning; but, honestly, nothing medical skill can do will have the slightest effect."

Gerald thanked him in a low voice for his kindly sympathy, and, when he had gone, sought his sister.

Marie met him with eager, questioning eyes, and one glance at his face told her all. "Gerald," she sobbed, "he will die, I can see it in your eyes"; then, as a sudden suspicion flashed through her brain, she cried, "Oh, my brother! surely he is not—"

"No," he answered quickly, for the girl's grief was pitiful to witness, "he still lives, but, sister mine, you must be brave, for—for," and his voice faltered, "Dr. McCarthy has forbidden us to hope."

He took the poor sobbing girl tenderly in his arms, and kissed her tear-stained face, while Marie, resting her head on his breast, abandoned herself to a paroxysm of grief. He let her sob unchecked, for he knew it was best, though his heart ached at the sight of her despair. Presently she became calmer, and, slipping her hand in his, whispered, "Let us go to him; I will be braver now, but it is all so terrible."

Gerald suddenly remembered the letter which had produced such fatal results, and, standing there side by side, they read it together. It ran thus:

"DEAR ROBERT,—

"Forgive my thus writing to you, but I do it in the most friendly spirit, and for the sake of old times, when you and I, trusty comrades, fought shoulder to shoulder in the battle of life. I have just received private information which may affect you. Unfortunately, it is impossible to doubt its accuracy. If you hold any shares in the Laughing Valley silver mine, get rid of them at once, should such a course be still open. The whole affair is rotten from beginning to end. Don't stay to think about our old quarrel now, but act immediately, for the sake of the children.

"TOM."

In the face of the terrible tragedy that had already occurred, they scarcely realised the magnitude of this new calamity; but Gerald hastily wrote a letter explaining matters to his father's lawyer, and despatched it to his private residence. Then, with noiseless steps, they proceeded to the sick-room, where their father's life was slowly ebbing away.

All through the long night hours they watched him, but he never moved or spoke, till in the early dawn, Marie touched her brother's arm, and whispered joyfully, "Gerald, he recognises us."

The girl was right. Into the dying man's eyes there gradually struggled the light of consciousness, but the expression was so pitiful, so pathetically sad, that their hearts ached.

Gerald leaned over the bedside and whispered tenderly, "Father, do you know us?" and the man moaned, "My boy, my bonny boy! it was for your sake. I did it for you and Marie. They told me it must succeed, there was not the slightest risk of failure; and, Reuben said, Esther would have a great fortune, out of all proportion to mine, and this would help to make matters more equal. Oh, my boy! I cared little for myself; it was to secure your happiness, and, instead, I have ruined you. But Reuben will help you; he will not forget that he owed his start in life to me. Reuben has always been my debtor, and he will be only too glad to repay now. Marie, my darling, kiss me, and tell me I am forgiven, though, my pretty one, I have ruined you."

The girl bent over, and kissed him passionately. "My poor father," she sobbed; "as though you needed to ask forgiveness from your own children. We know, Gerald and I, that you meant everything for the best, and it is not your fault that you have fallen into the hands of wicked, designing men. We do not fear poverty, my father, as long as you are spared to us," and she kissed him again, with a sweet tenderness.

Mr. Leigh smiled at her, with a look of gratitude. "You were ever good children," he murmured, "and I have repaid you ill. May Heaven bless you, and have mercy on your unfortunate father." His head fell back on the pillow, and he closed his eyes wearily.

Presently, Dr. McCarthy entered the room, but there needed no physician's skill to tell what was happening. Once Gerald glanced up, and the doctor bowed his head gravely, in answer to the implied question. "No, my boy," he said, in sympathetic tones, "prepare yourself for the worst. There is no hope; your father is sinking fast."

Suddenly the sick man's eyes unclosed, and he recognised the doctor. "Ah! McCarthy," he murmured, with a wan smile; "this is beyond your province; I have had my summons, and, were it not for those two, should be glad to go, for I am growing weary." Then he said softly, while a holy light illumined the worn face, "I am coming, my beloved—coming!" and the sorrowing watchers knew that already his freed spirit was winging its flight to the eternal shores.

Reverently they kissed the poor, tenantless clay, and then Gerald, taking his sister's unresisting hand, led her silently away from the awful majesty of death.

CHAPTER VII.

MARIE suffered herself to be conducted to her room, and there sat, dry-eyed and motionless. Tears, which on the previous day flowed so freely, now refused to come; her head burned, and she was conscious of but one thing—her father was dead!

All else was swallowed up in that one thought. Her father, on whom she had lavished all the wealth of a motherless girl's affection was lying still and cold in that other room.

Never more would the kindly eyes brighten with a loving smile at her approach; never again would she listen to his tender speech, nor feel the loving grasp of that strong right hand.

A solemn hush had fallen over the house—that vague and indefinable something which betokens the presence of death.

The sound of the door-bell penetrated into the girl's room, but she noticed it not, so absorbed she was in the contemplation of her woe.

The visitor was Godfrey Allen, the lawyer, and Gerald went to meet him.

"Good morning!" he began briskly. "On receipt of your note I judged it best—but, dear me, surely—"

"My father is dead," interrupted the young man, quietly; "he died this morning. The fatal news you learned from my letter last night killed him."

The lawyer's face gave evidence of a genuine sorrow.

Mr. Leigh and he had been personal friends for many years, and the information that his old associate was no more unnerved him.

But there was another matter which lent an added gravity to his features. Though of late he had not been fully cognizant of Mr. Leigh's business transactions, he knew enough to be filled with anxiety and alarm.

For a time he stood hesitating. It seemed barbarous to open the subject just then; but in face of Sir Thomas Braund's letter he felt he must act at once.

"Pardon me," he said, "the task is not a pleasant one, but necessity forces me. Coupling my own knowledge with the contents of Sir Thomas Braund's note, I fear that your father's affairs are in a very critical state, and for your sake and his it is necessary that they should be immediately inquired into. All his investments have left my hands, and if he really has entrusted them to the Stormont-Nesbitt firm, the sooner they are realised the better."

Gerald sighed wearily.

"You will not misunderstand me, Mr. Allen, I know," he said. "You were my father's friend. You have acted as his legal adviser for many years, and anything that can be done upon his behalf or mine you will do I am certain. For myself I know little of business matters, and for the present, at least, I cannot enter into them. Any papers that it may be necessary for me sign I will sign, and later, when my poor father's remains have been committed to the grave, you shall tell me what you have discovered."

Mr. Allen bowed.

"Your trust is not ill-placed," he said, "whatever man can do shall be done;" and he bade the young man farewell with evident emotion.

"'Tis a grievous business," he muttered, as he took his departure, "I greatly fear there will not be a penny for the lad. That Laughing Valley mine would swallow scores of larger fortunes than poor Leigh's;" and he proceeded to make very strong remarks concerning Reuben Stormont. "At all events," he concluded, more cheerfully, "they cannot touch the girl's money; that at least is safe."

Meanwhile one sentence of the dying man's ran in Gerald's head, and afforded some clue to his father's action. "Esther would have a large fortune."

Little by little he began to understand the matter more clearly. He guessed instinctively that Mr. Stormont had offered some opposition to the proposed marriage on the ground of disparity of fortune, and that his father had been tempted to engage in speculation in order to increase his wealth. If so, but he dared not pursue the subject any further, and he banished it resolutely from his mind.

At the time when Mr. Allen, after his interview with Gerald, was being driven to his office, Horace Merton was hurrying post-haste to his club. Several men were already there, and were eagerly discussing some important news.

"Have you heard the rumour, Merton?" asked one, catching sight of Horace.

"No! what is it?"

"That American fellow has come to grief at last. Half-a-dozen of his companies are tumbling down like a pack of cards. I wonder what Stormont thinks of his protégé now. I am afraid it spells ruin to a great many poor beggars."

"If you are discussing the Laughing Valley mine," said another, who had just entered, "it spells more than ruin to one man. They say Robert Leigh has shot himself. Poison told me, coming down, and he had it, I think, from Dr. McCarthy, who was called in."

Merton's face flushed scarlet.

"I don't believe it," he cried, "Robert Leigh was not that kind of man; more probably the news killed him."

"At all events he is dead," answered the other; and Merton, putting on his hat, left the room. In his own mind he felt sorely afraid that the report of Mr. Leigh's death was true, but he would see for himself. Perhaps he might be of some assistance.

Gerald received him sadly.

"You have heard the news?" he said, and Horace listened gravely while his friend briefly related what had occurred.

Presently Horace said,—

"Let me help you, Gerald. I know something of these things, and my experience may prove useful."

Gerald thanked him sincerely, but explained that Mr. Allen had already been, and that he had given him full power to do whatever he considered best.

There was another question burning on Horace's tongue, though he only found courage to put it as he was going away.

"And your sister, Marie," he asked, "how does she bear it? the blow must be terrible to her."

Gerald glanced keenly at the speaker.

"Yes," he answered, "the shock is a fearful one both for her and me. Marie is in her room, and refuses to be comforted."

Horace grasped his friend's hand and bade him farewell, with the secret intention of obtaining an interview with the lawyer, and afterwards attempting to ferret out the real history of Mr. Leigh's ruin.

On the morning succeeding the funeral Godfrey Allen called again, and his looks were graver even than before.

After the usual interchange of courtesies Gerald plunged into the subject.

"Your face tells me," he said, quietly, "that you are the bearer of ill news; but you will find me prepared to hear the worst. Only do not at present enter into details. Give me a broad outline of your discoveries, it will simplify matters. And, first and foremost I presume, my father died a ruined man?"

The lawyer inclined his head gravely.

"With no hope of recovering any of his possessions?"

"That also I am afraid is correct. I have been carefully through your father's papers, and as far as I can judge everything will be involved in the general wreck. To this statement there is happily one exception. Miss Leigh's property, inherited from her mother, and which at the present time is worth about three hundred a year, cannot of course be touched. That is hers absolutely; but beyond that I fear nothing will escape. As I mentioned previously, your father sold out all his safe investments, realising all the ready money he possibly could, and I find now that every penny went to bolster up these flimsy schemes, negotiated by Reuben Stormont and his American confederate."

"Then," the young man interrupted, "they are all ruined together?"

The lawyer did not attempt to conceal the amazement which this remark excited.

"My dear sir," he exclaimed, "you do not suppose these precious scoundrels kept their own worthless shares? Having once manufactured a market, they promptly sold out, leaving their helpless dupes to shift for themselves."

"But Reuben Stormont was my father's friend; surely, he would not have plotted his ruin!"

Again the lawyer smiled.

"Pardon me," he said, "I do not attempt to fathom Mr. Stormont's designs; I only state facts. All these schemes were hopeless from the beginning, and Mr. Stormont knew it. That he induced your lamented father to invest his money in them I know from my own personal experience; that they resulted in his death, and your own ruin, we are both aware. Those are the facts; it is for you to put your own interpretation upon them. We must not forget that Mr. Stormont did not act alone; indeed, speaking for myself, I should be inclined to give his confederate the major portion of the credit."

At the lawyer's last words Gerald remembered his sister's remark, on his return from Cazedon, and the scales fell from his eyes. Instantly he perceived the whole working of the vile conspiracy. A ruined man would be no fit suitor for the daughter of the wealthy stockbroker, and it was his ruin, not his father's, he understood clearly now, that his secret rival had been working to secure.

He thought of the terrible night on the Devonshire cliffs. Once more, in imagination, he

breasted the angry waves, and toiled painfully through the boiling surf; and this was his reward—his father dead, and he himself deprived alike of love and fortune.

And there was no hope! From the very first he recognized that. For his own honour's sake he must release Esther from her promise. He had forgotten the lawyer, who was watching him narrowly; he had even forgotten the man who had dealt him this cruel blow; he could only remember his darling's bonny face, and think that he was about to lose her for ever. Not that he faltered in his determination for an instant. He would go that very evening to her house, and carry his resolve into execution.

Long after the lawyer left him, he sat there, white and silent, looking forward to his empty, lonely future, and wondering, in a dazed way, what sin he had committed, to have justified such a heavy punishment.

He was interrupted in his reverie by Marie's entrance. Her beautiful face still bore traces of her recent grief, but she bore herself bravely.

Crossing the room, she laid her hand on her brother's shoulder with a caressing touch.

"Gerald," she whispered gently, "have you learned the worst?"

He nodded gloomily.

"Yes, it is as we expected. With the exception of your little fortune, we are beggared."

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him lovingly.

"My poor boy," she murmured, "I am so sorry for you."

The girl's heart divined the secret of her brother's grief; and when, in the evening, he quietly left the house, she knew intuitively that he was about to visit Esther for the last time.

CHAPTER VIII.

REUBEN STORMONT was in his own room, deeply immersed in a mass of intricate figures, when Gerald was announced, but he gave orders for him to be shown up immediately.

"It is a nuisance," the stockbroker grumbled to himself, "but it is a necessary evil, and the sooner the matter is over the better."

He greeted his visitor coldly, but politely, and then for some time there was an awkward silence.

The young man broke the silence.

"Mr. Stormont," he said, "it need not take many words to explain the object of my visit. In common with the rest of the world, you have heard of my poor father's death, and the cause which led to it. It would be mere affectation to presume that you were ignorant how seriously he was involved in the companies which have recently failed, and therefore I need not say anything further than that he died a ruined man. That is all a matter of history, and I will not weary you with it; the reason of my presence here is a personal one. In happier days, when my father was a rich man, it was agreed that I should marry your daughter Esther. I need not tell you how I loved her, how all the happiness of my life was centred in her affection; neither need I remind you that your daughter returned my love, and promised to be my wife. Those days have passed never to return. I stand before you ruined, and a beggar. Under these circumstances there is but one course to pursue—to release Esther from her engagement."

A sigh of relief escaped the stockbroker's lips as he listened to the young man's decision.

"Gerald, my boy," he exclaimed, with apparent sincerity, "believe me, I am deeply grieved at what has occurred. I myself have been severely bitten, and have lost several thousands, though I was not so deeply involved as your father appears to have been. But, with regard to Esther, I am glad you have the sense to perceive that matters cannot remain on their old footing. Personally, I like you, and believe you would make her a good husband; but there are other matters to be taken into consideration, and though it grieves me deeply, yet I must say that,

as things have turned out, your decision is a wise one."

"You will permit me to bid Esther farewell, Mr. Stormont?"

"Certainly, my boy; you will find her in the drawing-room, I believe. Her mother has a slight headache, and retired to her room immediately after dinner."

Gerald thanked him, and went slowly downstairs.

During the interview with Mr. Stormont, Esther, who had noted his arrival, sat, sick at heart, in the drawing-room, waiting anxiously for the sound of her lover's footsteps.

Already her father had thrown out several hints, which had set her pulse throbbing violently; but though she returned no answer, there arose in her heart a firm determination that, in spite of everything, she would remain true to her plighted troth.

She had viewed with dismay the growth of the intimacy between the American and her father, and secretly dreaded the former's increasing influence.

Until quite recently she had not suspected Lancelot's ultimate design; but when she realized that this man, who owed his life to Gerald's heroism, was planning deliberately to make her his wife, her scorn and indignation knew no bounds.

And now her lover was coming to break off their engagement.

She greeted him with a sad smile. She gazed at his handsome face, clouded by grief and sorrow, and recognized that he had come to say farewell.

"Esther, my beloved," he said gravely, taking her fair, white hand in his, "I have a difficult task to perform. You have heard of my great loss—my father is dead, and I am a beggar. Mr. Allen, our lawyer, has been with me to-day, and from him I learn that, after settling all claims against my father's estate, there will be literally nothing left. Under these circumstances there was but one honourable course to pursue. I have seen your father, and laid the case before him fairly. Esther, my darling," he continued earnestly, "you understand me, do you not?"

For answer the girl laid her beautiful face on his shoulder, and sobbed bitterly.

"Gerald!" she cried, "my brave, true-hearted lover, what is poverty or wealth to me, so that we are not parted? I care nothing for this money, of which you make so much; besides, even, if you are poor, I am rich, my father has told me so repeatedly."

A sad smile played over Gerald's features.

"My darling," he said, "do you not see that is the barrier. If you were poor, all might still be well with us. But you are a rich man's daughter. Do you think your father would consent to our marriage, or that I could ask him. No, Esther, believe me, though it breaks my heart to say so, we must part. I shall never cease loving you, darling. Of all fair women, you will ever be for me the fairest and the best; but I cannot, I will not, drag you with me in my fall."

The girl made no reply, but she clung to him, with a half-frightened air. Presently, he stooped and kissed her fondly. "Esther!" he whispered, with a breaking voice, "do not make my task still harder. Look up! my darling, and kiss me for the last time!"

She raised her face, all stained with tears, and he kissed her passionately, then releasing her, he whispered, "Good-bye, sweet love; some day I trust you may yet be happy."

She looked resolutely into his eyes, and said, "Gerald, in the sweet days long past, you taught me to love you, and when, one starlit night last summer, you asked me to be your wife, there was not a happier girl under God's sky. My speech may be unmaidenly; I know not, but this I know, that until you tell me your love is dead I will not give you back your troth. Do you remember Gerald? through weal or woe, we swore to be faithful to each other, while life lasted, and I am going to keep my vow."

She kissed him fondly, and when, after one long last embrace he left her, she went straight to her father's room.

Mr. Stormont's brow clouded when he noticed the traces of tears on his daughter's face, but he spoke lightly.

"Well Esther, my girl," he said, "that is one disagreeable matter over. I must say the young man acted most honourably, though he knew, that under the altered circumstances, there was nothing else to be done. Dry your eyes, child, I'll warrant we shall soon find you a husband who will be better able to take care of his money than poor Gerald," and he laughed good humouredly.

"Papa," the girl answered, and there was no symptom of weakness or hesitation, in her voice, "I have come to repeat what I said to him. I do not wish to seem disrespectful, but it is best you should learn the truth. I will never give Gerald up. Nay, listen to me," for Mr. Stormont interrupted angrily, "I have made my decision, and nothing will alter it."

"I am grieved, terribly grieved, to cause you a moment's displeasure, but it is only just you should know, that I will never marry any man save Gerald Leigh."

Reuben Stormont stared at his daughter in amazement. This opposition to his plans, coming, as it did, so unexpectedly, annoyed him, and he scarcely dared trust himself to speak.

"Go to your room, child," he exclaimed presently, "You are talking nonsense. To-morrow I trust you will be ashamed of this silly exhibition."

The girl left the room quietly, and Reuben Stormont once more settled down to his work. It seemed that evening, however, as if he were fated to be interrupted, for he had but just taken up his pen, when a servant knocked at the door, and handed him a card. The stockbroker glanced at it impatiently, and a sight of the name did not add to his satisfaction.

"Horace Merton," he muttered, "what on earth can he want? Perhaps I had better see him;" then aloud, "Show the gentleman up."

Horace's face, as he entered the room, wore an air of satisfaction, which his host did not fail to notice.

"Good evening, Mr. Stormont," he said, "I fear the time is a trifle awkward, but my business is pressing, and will not afford to wait. However, I will try not to detain you long, though I must warn you that my communication is of a startling character."

The stockbroker adjusted his glasses, and gazed blankly at Horace. "Upon my word, Mr. Merton," he exclaimed, "this is very extraordinary."

"Yes," Horace assented, "I admit it. The fact is, I have been investigating the affairs of the companies which ruined Robert Leigh, and have made an unpleasant discovery. You will be surprised to learn that your secretary, or partner, or whatever your American friend may be, is a thorough-paced rogue and swindler. Yes, I know," he continued pleasantly, as the other was about to speak, "the language is strong, but I am prepared to justify every word. Indeed, one consideration alone, prevented my applying immediately for a warrant for his arrest. The one existing obstacle was yourself. Do not get angry, my dear sir; you will acknowledge the force of my reasoning in a moment. Should I use the information which a lucky accident has placed in my possession, a searching investigation must take place into the details of those unfortunate transactions with which you and he were jointly associated. Now, experience teaches me that a daring adventurer like Nesbitt will stick at nothing, and, forgive my hinting at such a thing, but it seemed exceedingly probable, that he would endeavour to shield himself at your expense. This would defeat my object, of which, by the way, Gerald Leigh knows nothing."

"Neither do I," remarked Mr. Stormont, dryly.

Horace laughed.

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CHAPTER XI.

PAUL HARDY found his position as Lord Fane's secretary even pleasanter than he had expected. The peer was not a brilliantly clever man, in fact, his mental gifts were very average; but he was kind-hearted almost to a fault, and he spared no pains to make those about him happy.

He had no son. His only daughter would one day inherit an ample fortune, and it was her parents' great wish she should marry her cousin, who must succeed to both title and estates; but Lord and Lady Fane were far too easy-going to attempt to coerce Hildred, who, in truth, reigned over them with autocratic sway.

It was her suggestion that her father should engage a secretary, for Lord Fane was utterly unpractical, his correspondence accumulated to a fearful extent before he troubled to answer a single letter, while the library was in great need of supervision, and there really was plenty of work at the Castle for an active, intelligent young man.

Lady Fane had been dead against the arrangement—a very pretty woman still, in spite of her forty odd years—she had seen the inconvenient possibilities which had never occurred to either her husband or daughter.

"He will fall in love with Dreda just as you get used to him," she complained, "and Dreda is quite romantic enough to insist upon marrying him."

"That's nonsense," said Lord Fane, "Paul Hardy's a gentleman, and would never betray my trust."

My lady shrugged her shoulders.

"He's only twenty-eight. He will be thrown into close intimacy with Hildred, and I suppose you will admit she is very fascinating."

"I'm sure I wish she'd fascinate Aylmer," said Lord Fane, alluding to his nephew. "Lucy, women generally understand these things, can you tell me why those two don't fall in love?"

"Because they both know everyone hopes and expects that they will do so," returned Hildred's mother, with admirable frankness; "and if you have any desire to see the match come off you ought never to have brought home a penniless young man to flirt with your daughter."

But this was before she had seen the secretary. When late on that Saturday evening in July Lord Fane brought the young man into the drawing-room at Netherton Castle and presented him to his wife, she felt a reaction in Paul's favour. It was not that he was handsome, but that his face had a charm about it which appealed to her fancy.

The broad open brow, the dark expressive eyes, and the deep musical voice were so different from my lady's preconceived notions of a secretary, that she took Paul into her favour at once.

"I expected a mild young man with a generally depressed appearance and a hacking cough," she told her husband later on, "a young man, you know, who showed his poverty at every turn and rather gloried in it; but this Mr. Hardy looks as proud as you do, and is quite as well dressed."

Lord Fane smiled.

"He was recommended to me as a genius; but I'll confess he doesn't go in for any of the eccentricities which generally mark the possessors of the 'divine fire.' He can smoke and ride, talks well on any subject, and really is a very amusing young man."

Lady Fane sighed.

"If it wasn't for the thought of Hildred I should be delighted with him."

"Hildred won't be home for another ten days," was the peer's reply. "With your usual skill, my dear Lucy, you might drop a hint to Hardy that we have arranged for her to marry Aylmer. You need not declare the engagement actually exists; but just let him know our hopes are set on it."

Lady Fane was not reduced to this device. The second Sunday after Paul came to the Castle she happened to enter the library while he was

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writing a letter, and could not help seeing that it consisted of several closely-written sheets.

Some great ladies would not have troubled their heads on the subject, but Lucy Fane had a very keen heart.

The son she had lost would have been nearly Paul's age had he lived, and perhaps this thought made the Secretary's grave, almost wistful, expression touch her, and she asked,—

"Are you writing to your mother, Mr. Hardy? I'm afraid my girl wouldn't treat me to such a long letter."

Paul Hardy smiled. The interest in his affairs was very pleasant to the lonely man.

"My mother died before I could remember her, and I have not a relation in the world; but I am engaged to be married, and—"

He paused.

Lady Fane's face puzzled him. She looked as though he had relieved her of some terrible fear.

"I am so glad," she said, frankly. "I mean I believe in young men 'settling' early. It is such a good thing for them. Have you been engaged long, Mr. Hardy?"

"More than a year. I am hoping to be married in another twelve months; but we neither of us have any private means, and story-writing seems too slight a capital to marry on."

Lady Fane had actually sat down. Apart from her love for her daughter she was really a kind, unselfish woman. So long as Paul would not be likely to fall in love with Hildred she was quite ready to take an interest in him.

"She must miss you very much," alluding to his fiancée, "does she live in London?"

"Yes. I used to see her every Saturday and Sunday. We were both too busy to meet on other days."

"You don't mean that she 'writes' too?" said Lady Fane. "Women who write stories can't have much leisure to fall in love."

"I don't think Fortune ever wrote a story in her life. Her father was a country clergyman; since his death she has earned her living by copying deeds for lawyers."

"It must be terribly hard work."

"Hard enough for me to long to be able to take her away from it. But I ought not to intrude my affairs on y-u, Lady Fane."

"I am pleased to know about them. My husband and I am anxious you should feel at home with us, Mr. Hardy; the Castle is a very quiet place. Aylmer, Lord Fane's nephew and heir, very seldom spends more than a month at a time here, and my daughter does not like the country."

"Miss Fane is coming home to-morrow, I am told," remarked Paul.

"Yes, Hildred is a sad wanderer. We have so many relations who like her to visit them, and she finds the Castle dull."

Paul felt decidedly unprepossessed in the young lady's favour. He had a dim impression Miss Fane's will was law at Netherpton, and that she ruled her parents in all things. He pictured her to himself a fashionable, capricious beauty, looking down on her parents' simple tastes, and caring nothing for home. It came upon him as a revelation when, going into the drawing-room just before dinner (he took his meals with the family, and was treated in-re as a guest than a secretary), Lady Fane presented him to the new arrival.

Hildred was twenty-two, and, unlike most heroines, she looked her age, and rather more. She had soft, wavy black hair; eyes of dark intense blue, shaded by long black lashes; a clear, almost colourless skin, and a broad open forehead. She wore a soft, clinging dress of white silk, fastened at the waist by a girdle of filigree silver. She shook hands with Mr. Hardy very frankly.

"If you find the library in a hopeless state of confusion and my father's correspondence about twelve months in arrears, Mr. Hardy, you must not blame me. I have been trying to persuade him to look for a secretary for quite two years."

They went in to dinner, and Paul confessed the meal had acquired a new brightness. Hildred Fane talked well. She had the gift of amusing people almost without effort, and a perfect tact which made her suit her conversation to her

audience so perfectly that no one ever felt neglected or *de trop*.

Perhaps guessing Mr. Hardy had been very little in fashionable society Hildred did not talk of her parties and her friends, but of books and theatres, of the newest reviews and the latest concerts.

It was only when the dessert was on the table, and the servants had retired, that Lord Fane had the chance to ask,—

"Did you see much of your cousin? I suppose Aylmer was your escort to all these amusements?"

There was a malicious sparkle in Hildred's blue eyes.

"Oh dear no, papa! Captain Fane is far too much occupied for such frivolity. I saw Aylmer—I think once—and he offered to take me to a missionary meeting, which I declined."

"Hildred!"

"Well," with a charming smile, "perhaps it wasn't quite a missionary meeting. It was to hear some wonderful philanthropist speak about something, but I wasn't interested. Aylmer has a way of preaching to his friends which I find intensely trying."

Her mother nodded to her, and they left the gentlemen alone over their wine.

Lord Fane looked troubled.

"There isn't a better fellow going anywhere than Aylmer, and my daughter has a heart of gold, but somehow those two never can agree. It's hard on me, for I have set my heart—ever since my boy died—on their marriage."

"I understood they were engaged."

"I wish they were. Aylmer is a serious, thoughtful young man, and Hildred declares he preaches to her. She will persist in showing him the very worst side of herself. I can tell you I feel sometimes so exasperated I could shake them both."

Paul Hardy laughed. He really could not help it; Lord Fane's anxiety was so genuine.

"It's no laughing matter," retorted the peer. "Most of my money is in my own power, and I can leave it to Hildred if I choose, but then what's to become of Aylmer; he can't keep up the title if I make my daughter my heiress."

In the drawing-room Lady Fane was attempting a mild rebuke, but it made no impression on Hildred.

"Mother, dear, I know Aylmer's a model young man, but, perhaps it's my low taste, I can't bear model young men. I might like him a wee bit if he wasn't always trying to improve me. I don't want to be improved. You and father are contented with me as I am; what do other people matter?"

"We shan't be here always, dear."

"You are only forty-six. You come of a long-lived family, so I needn't think of that for another thirty years. Mother, dear, I'll promise to stay quietly at home for ages if you won't sing Aylmer's praises too loudly."

Lady Fane felt vanquished, and changed the subject.

"What do you think of Mr. Hardy, dear?"

"I think any plan has succeeded beautifully. Mr. Hardy seems to suit father down to the ground. He is a pleasant, cultured gentleman, and I am sure he must be a charming addition to our circle."

This was dreadful. Lady Fane struck in hastily.

"I don't suppose he'll stay here long; he's engaged to be married, and will be wanting to make a home for his wife."

"I thought so."

"Hildred, how could you possibly tell?"

There came an indescribable softening to the beautiful face as the girl replied,—

"When a man cares very much for one woman it gives him a manner a great gentleness to all others. I was quite sure by the way Mr. Hardy talked to you he was either engaged or deeply attached to someone."

"I can't understand your reasoning, Hildred, but you are quite right. She is a clergyman's daughter, and they neither of them have any private means."

Hildred nodded.

"He'll stay here till he's saved a little money, then he'll furnish a tiny house in some hideous,

cheap London suburb, and they'll be married. Perhaps they'll keep one little maid of all work, and wash at home; but the meals will seem sweeter to him than those presided over by our invaluable butler, and the little bit of back yard, where the clothes hang out to dry, will be more beautiful in his eyes than our rose garden."

"Hildred, don't talk like that."

She sighed.

"I only mean that Mr. Hardy and Miss— (you haven't told me her name), not being actions of a noble family, are allowed to fall in love. Now, when you make plans for me, mother, rank and wealth, fashion and *les convenances*, all have to be considered, but never love. I suppose it's not necessary to a daughter of a noble family to know what love means?"

"Hildred, don't talk like that. I can't bear it."

Hildred smiled defiantly.

"You try so hard to be worldly wise, mother, and yet you have a large, true heart."

"My dear, I married your father for love," said Lady Fane. "He wasn't rich or a peer then."

"And yet you wish me to marry Aylmer, just because he will be both."

"Hildred, will you answer me one question? What is it you dislike so much in your cousin?"

Hildred hesitated.

"I think it's his calm, cool consideration. He doesn't care a jot for me, and yet he believes he has only to propose to me and I shall accept him. There's only one thing to improve Aylmer and make him human—if he could fail desperately and passionately in love."

By mutual consent the name of Aylmer was banished from the family conversation during the next month, and Hildred, in consequence, beamed on everyone, and was her brightest self. To Paul Hardy she was friendly and cordial, treating him with a courtesy which had no shade of patronage. Perhaps the knowledge of his engagement made her yet more at ease with him, and Paul realised as the days wore on, that in Lord Fane's daughter he had a true friend.

"What is the matter?" Hildred asked him one September morning when the cloud she had noticed gathering on his face during the last fortnight looked even heavier than usual. "Have you had bad news?"

They were riding together over the breezy common which skirted the park. Paul Hardy was often Miss Fane's escort, but she had never before known him so silent.

"No—at least it ought to be good. I must not trouble you with my affairs, Miss Fane. I am afraid I am a gloomy, morose being."

"No, you are not; but you are worrying over something, perhaps," and she gave him a bright, little smile, "I ought to say over somebody."

"Miss Fane," said Paul, looking up, suddenly, "You have been a great deal in London. You must know everyone in society. Do you mind telling me if you ever met Lord Carlyon?"

"I don't mind telling you in the least. I have met Lord Carlyon twice. As you may know, he cares very little for social festivities, and will hardly accept any invitations. I liked him very much; of course it's awful folly the step he's going to take, but there's something noble about it for all that."

Paul looked at her with a haggard, anxious face.

"Fortune Langley, the girl I hope to marry, is Lord Carlyon's cousin, they were brought up together as children."

"Well, I don't think the connection with Lord Carlyon need trouble you. I should not mind having him for a cousin."

"You don't understand, Miss Fane. Fortune and her brother are on a visit at Carlyon Court, the Earl is going to find Dene a situation. Don't you see what has happened. Meeting Fortune again, his old childish affection has ripened into something deeper, and only her promise to me prevents her from being a Countess."

"Has she written to tell you so?"

"No; but there is a strange reserve and dejection in her letters, and my theory explains it."

"Your theory is only fit for a man in love,"

said Hildred, rather contemptuously. "Luckily, I can enlighten you. Lord Carlyon can't be your rival, as he happens to be engaged to a Miss Belden. She is a nobody. Her father is a gambler, and there are some very dark stories about the girl herself; but Lord Carlyon is perfectly infatuated, he is going to forfeit more than half his property by marrying her within the time forbidden by his grandfather's will. He would hardly go anywhere in London without her, and now I hear his aunt is at Carlyon Court on purpose that Miss Belden may be one of his guests."

A strange sparkle came to Paul's eyes.

"You are sure of this? You would not deceive me?"

"I never deceived any one in my life. I have met Miss Belden, I have heard a great deal about her; and I think the very idea of her marrying Lord Carlyon must be painful to any one who cares for him. If your *fiancée* have a spark of regard for her cousin, Mr. Hardy, to see the kind of woman he has lost his heart to must be enough to make her sad and anxious. I am not a fanciful person, but I can tell you I should hate the idea of any one belonging to me marrying Iris Belden. I can't explain my meaning, but the very sound of her voice seems to say she is false to the core."

"And you think—"

"I think that probably Miss Langley, being a good, true woman, is disgusted at her cousin's choice, but that, being his guest, she can not well avow her feelings. I shouldn't wonder if she were counting the days till she could go home."

"And I thought the luxury of Carlyon Court and the sight of her cousin's wealth had made her weary of our engagement."

Hildred shook her head.

"How hard men are on women," she said gravely, "even when they pretend to care for them."

"Pretend!" cried Paul eagerly. "Why, I love her as my own soul!"

"But you do not trust her as you trust yourself," said his acute companion. "Well, I suppose you are no worse than the rest. Men always are unfair to women, and always will be."

There was an evening post at Netherton Castle, and Lord Fane always received by it his evening paper. How this was managed Paul Hardy never quite understood. Either it was posted in London by three o'clock, or the clerk at the railway bookstall at the station nearest to the Castle put it in the pillar-box on the platform in time for the second despatch. Anyhow, the paper never failed to appear. Hildred rallied her father on his devotion to it, declaring he never got any news published in London after noon, and that the so-called evening paper only spoilt his interest in the next day's *Morning Post*; but Lord Fane, who could be obstinate on occasion, stuck firmly to his *Evening Herald*.

It was the same day as Hildred's conversation with the secretary. Lord Fane had been to attend a committee-meeting, and dinner was postponed till eight to suit his convenience.

Paul Hardy was in the library, working away at the new catalogue he was making for his patron, when the door opened noiselessly, and Hildred entered.

She was dressed for the evening in a soft salmon-tinted robe of cashmere, embroidered with silver; there were sprays of silver ivy in her dark hair and round her fair, white neck.

She went up to Paul's side, with a strangely anxious expression on her mobile face.

"Mr. Hardy"

He started. Something in her voice alarmed him in spite of himself.

"Is there anything the matter, Miss Fane? Surely, your father has not met with an accident?"

"Papa is not due for another half-hour; but I have been reading the *Evening Herald*, and there is something in it which concerns you. I wanted you to see it first; I thought if papa began talking about it before you it would be such a shock."

Like a creature in a dream Paul took the

paper from her hand, and read where her finger pointed,—

"SAD DEATH OF A NOBLEMAN."

"We regret to announce the decease of the Earl of Carlyon. The lamented nobleman was walking home alone, carrying his gun, when his foot stumbled, and the gun, which was unfortunately loaded, went off, the bullet entering his heart and killing him at once."

"The inquest will open to-morrow (Saturday), but will be a mere formality, as no one entertains a doubt that Lord Carlyon's fate was purely accidental."

"The deceased nobleman was unmarried, and is succeeded in the title and estates by his third cousin, Dene Langley, only son of the late Rev. Percival Langley, whose great-grandfather was Eric, sixth Lord Carlyon."

The paper slipped from Paul's nerveless hand.

"Is it true?" he asked slowly. "Is that idle, never-do-well Dene really an English earl?"

"I am afraid so," said Hildred slowly; "but it won't make any difference to you, except that your *fiancée* won't have to toil any more at that terrible copying, but will have a pleasant home to wait in until you can claim her as your own."

Paul looked up anxiously.

"You know the world, Miss Fane—isn't it cowardly to keep her to her promise, when she could do so much better?"

Something like tears gathered in Hildred's eyes.

"Miss Langley will not want to do better if she love you."

CHAPTER XII.

"DEATH through Misadventure."

Such was the verdict of the twelve men "honest and true" whom the Coroner summoned to decide how Eric Lord Carlyon met his fate. Throughout the whole inquiry no one so much as hinted the young Earl might have been the victim of foul play; not a creature suggested he might have laid violent hands on himself.

No, it was an accident pure and simple, and such was the verdict Mr. Dover presently carried to the upper room, where his wife sat in close attendance on Lady Darnley.

"Thank Heaven!" said Mrs. Dover reverently. "George, where is Fortune Langley? She will be as glad as any of us that no shadow of blame has been cast on poor Eric's memory."

"I thought she was here. Can she have gone to Miss Belden?"

"Hardly; they are not friends," interposed Lady Darnley. "I wish Miss Belden and her father would leave the Court. Mr. Dover, could you not tell them so?"

"I am afraid there is only one person who can do that, Dene Langley, the new Lord Carlyon, and he seems too dazed to think of anything so I fear, my Lady, the Beldens will remain till Tuesday, which is the day fixed for the funeral."

"So soon?"

Mr. Dover sighed.

"I see no use in prolonging a very painful time. None of us would willingly leave the Court until we have paid the last mark of respect to poor Eric: after that I fancy we shall all be thankful to take wing."

Lady Darnley turned towards the lawyer and looked him keenly in the face,—

"Why do you dislike the new Earl?"

"My dear Lady, I never —"

"You never told me in words but I am certain of it by your manner."

"I may be deceived, but I fancy he is a bit of a hypocrite; he affects to be so utterly cast down at Eric's fate that I get incredulous; he gains rank, a fair estate, and ten thousand a year by the death of a cousin he had not seen till last month, for a dozen years. I can't believe he is so cut up as he pretends to be."

Mrs. Dover interposed.

"Fortune seems equally cast down, and I would stake a great deal on her truth."

"So would I," admitted the lawyer; "I can't help wishing she was owner of Carlyon instead of her brother; I don't like that young man; candidly, I never shall."

"Where is he?" asked Mrs. Dover rather absently.

"Shut up in the library with Mr. Belden. I should not be in the least surprised if the latter were not trying to extort some provision for his daughter on the plea that she was almost Lady Carlyon."

But neither the lawyer nor Lady Darnley guessed what passed at that interview which had been sought by Charles Belden at his daughter's desire; the adventurer felt far more at ease with the new Earl than he had ever done with poor Eric; and the latter had—so to say—been always in the purple, while Dene, until that fatal Thursday, had been almost as impecunious as the gambler himself.

"We shall be leaving here on Wednesday," said Mr. Belden, "but I hope you will visit us in London; after all that has passed you can never be as a stranger to us."

He laid an ominous stress upon the *all* which was not just on Dene; he did not like what he had seen of Mr. Belden, though Iris had fascinated him nearly as thoroughly as she had fascinated his poor cousin.

"Thank you," he said gravely, "but I am not likely to be in London for the present; there will be too much to see to here, and I feel too sad for visiting."

"My dear young friend," said Mr. Belden, airily, "you need not take that tone with me; of course it is very proper to seem shocked, and that at your cousin's fate; but as you gain wealth, rank and love by his death I don't believe you are at all inconsolable."

Dene hated the speaker for his words but was afraid to resent them.

"Iris has told me everything," went on Mr. Belden, "and when the right time comes you won't find me obdurate."

Lord Carlyon went upstairs; his one object was to be alone, and to escape alike from Mr. Belden's confidences and George Dover's cold scrutiny; not till he was safe in the shelter of his own room did it occur to him that he had not seen his sister since the night of Eric's death.

"Fortune will rejoice in my prosperity," he thought; "she was fond of Eric, but a brother comes before a cousin and she was always devoted to me. She must live here as my chaperone, by and by, I shouldn't wonder if I could get her acknowledged as Lady Fortune Langley; I don't know how it's done but I fancy the Queen grants sometimes women the rank they would have enjoyed had their fathers lived to succeed to a title, 'Lady Fortune,' it sounds well, and of course she'll have to break with that beggar Hardy. I never really liked the fellow and for him to aspire to an Earl's sister would be ridiculous, perfectly absurd."

Dinner was a trying meal that night. When a great calamity has fallen on a house and people have exhausted their comments of surprise, grief and sympathy, there comes a time when conversation is difficult; with the dread presence of death in the house no one likes to talk on ordinary topics and yet the four men gathered in the dining-room at Carlyon Court had said all they could say about the recent tragedy.

The result was that the meal passed almost in silence; though they had little to say each had plenty to think of. Lord Norman, who was returning home that night (driving over again on Tuesday for the funeral), was wondering what portion the new Earl would give his sister. Jack Norman had lost his heart to Fortune Langley, and his father admired her extremely; of course while she was a penniless girl, with only an impecunious brother belonging to her, such a match would not have answered, but now, if Lord Carlyon behaved generously, Fortune might be quite a desirable *parti*; there was a rumour she had a lover in a humble walk of life, but Lord Norman did not feel disposed to credit it.

Mr. Belden had his own plans and schemes; with him there was but one fixed purpose—that his daughter should still be Lady Carlyon. As for the lawyer, he was feeling an unpleasant consciousness that the more he saw of his new client the less he liked him, while the new Earl himself was haunted by visions of the past; he seemed to see again the shabby sitting-room at Guilford—



LIKE A CREATURE IN A DREAM PAUL TOOK THE PAPER FROM HILDRED'S HAND, AND READ WHERE HER FINGER POINTED.

street, and Eric's bright face as he gave his hospitable invitation.

Then the scene changed, and Dene saw Eric as the courteous host welcoming him and Fortune to Carlyon, and then—but the next picture is too dark to dwell on. What wonder Dene's face was pale, or that the hand which played with his wine-glass trembled.

Fortune Langley said nothing to anyone of her interview with the man from the convalescent home at Sherrington; she locked the silver match-box away in her travelling desk, sent one of the servants to learn the verdict of the jury, and sat down on a low chair by her dressing table with an agony of suspense at her heart.

Like Mrs. Dover, she too said "thank Heaven" when she learned the result of the inquest; then fairly worn out she let Phoebe bring her a tray of wine and sandwiches and undress her, then she crept into bed, falling asleep like a tired-out child.

But her awakening was terrible. The September sunshine poured full into her room on that sad Sunday morning, and Phoebe was standing by her bed with some breakfast.

"Dr. Jeremy will be here presently, Miss Langley," said the girl respectfully, "would you like to see him?"

"See him!" repeated Fortune, "why, I am not ill."

"You look so tired, ma'am, and your brother came up last night, and was so concerned when I told him you'd gone to bed with a bad headache; he said the doctor would be here this morning and he hoped you'd see him."

Fortune shook her head.

"I'm only very tired, Phoebe, and a little shaken by the shock; I don't think I'll get up just yet."

"And what shall I tell the Earl, ma'am?"

"The Earl." Oh, how those two words smote on Fortune's heart; how she longed for the old days in Guilford-street, when Dene was a needy clerk out of employment.

"Tell him I am resting," was the girl's reply. "I will send word when I feel able to see him."

Phoebe was playing with her white apron. She was one of the under-housemaids, but Lady Darnley had deputed her to wait on Miss Langley, and the girl was really attached to Fortune.

"If you please, ma'am," she began nervously, "you'll be wanting a maid of your own now you'll be mistress here, and if you'd only give me a trial I'd serve you faithfully; I'm used to needlework for mother's a dressmaker, and I'm sure I should soon pick up hair dressing."

"I am sure you would soon make a clever, useful maid, Phoebe," said Fortune Langley kindly, "but I don't think I shall ever need one. You are mistaken in thinking I shall be mistress of Carlyon Court; my home is in London, and very soon I shall be going back to it."

But the servant's petition had roused Fortune as nothing else could have done. Of course, what Phoebe thought was the opinion of the world at large; since she had shared Dene's poverty how could anyone dream she would part from him now he was rich.

She thought over the future till thought was almost agony, only one thing was certain, she could not, must not, make her home at Carlyon Court.

"I should go mad," thought the poor girl as she mused over her future. "To me Eric's home would be haunted. No, there is only one thing for it, I must go back to London."

She thought of her lover, of Paul Hardy and his faithful love, and her pain grew deeper still; how could she marry Paul and keep from him always the terrible secret which had fallen like a blight upon her own life.

She believed that secret was shared by no one; she believed it was locked for ever in her own heart, but she could not be sure. If ever the true story of Thursday night were published to the world, a burden of undying shame must be her portion, and could she bring this upon Paul; could she take him as a dower a shadowed name? No! a hundred times, no; one blow had made her life desolate, she had lost them both, lover and brother, too, at one fell stroke.

As soon as she was dressed and settled in the sunny window of the sitting-room she wrote two letters, one to Mrs. Cox, announcing her return to Guilford-street on Wednesday, the other to Paul Hardy.

The pen lingered lovingly over the name as she addressed the envelope; probably it was the last time her fingers would ever trace that name, the very last, for the two lives that were to have been one would henceforth be divided for all time.

But the inside of the letter she wrote quickly, indeed with almost feverish haste, as though she could not trust her resolution if she delayed.

"All is over between us; forget that you have ever known me, forget all our hopes and dreams for the future; I cannot explain my reasons. I am writing of my own free will, no one else knows what I am doing. Forgive me, if you can."
"FORTUNE."

She pressed the paper to her lips, kissing with passionate warmth the dead lifeless thing that was to bring to her lover such a heart-ache; then she rang the bell and gave both her letters to Phoebe.

"I want you to post these yourself," she told the girl. "With all the trouble in the house the letter-box may be delayed; I shall feel easier about these if you take them yourself to the pillar box by the church."

"I'll post them, ma'am; I'm going round to see my mother after tea, and her cottage is close to the letter box. I'll put them in with my own hand."

It was done beyond recall; of her own act and deed she had sent her lover from her for ever. It seemed to Fortune Langley that her youth, her hopes, her power of happiness all died that September afternoon, and then she realised there was yet another pang in store for her, as looking up suddenly, she saw her brother, the new Lord Carlyon, standing by her side, and watching her, a dissatisfied expression on his handsome face.

(To be continued.)



"THAT WOMAN IS AN ABANDONED ADVENTRESS, MR. RUDOLPH DE VERE—THAT'S WHAT SHE IS, SIR!" SAID GABRIEL GAUNT.

LOVE IN A MAZE.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

TAMAR PAYNE'S MEMORY.

THEY were not out of sight, however, when, ambling along in the blinding dust-cloud which their spirited animals had created upon the road, came old Gabriel Gaunt in his low, black, basket-chaise drawn by the shaggy pony.

The mere sight of Elizabeth Dawson had stirred up the old dandy's choler. The very wayside dust caused by her horses' hoofs he irascibly interpreted as tacit insult; for it powdered his blue frock-coat and glossy hat and smirched his painted skinny cheek-bones. As she and the Honourable Colin Chepstowe flashed past the low basket-carriage, Dr. Gabriel Gaunt, in impotent rage, screamed out an oath—glib, naughty words which hurt nobody, and which nobody luckily heard save himself; so that his humour was scarcely one of forbearance and Christian charity towards his fellow-mortals when he drew rein at Tamar Payne's gate.

He alighted, hitched the reins to an alder stump in the hedge, and bawled shrilly:

"Well, Payne, and how do I find you? How's the sciatica this morning, Payne?"

Tamar's circle of acquaintances was a wide and varied one; but no single member thereof, with the exception of Dr. Gabriel Gaunt, senior, ever presumed to call the dame "Payne" *tout court*. It was a familiarity, an indignity indeed, that was objectionable to her in the extreme; and it never failed to put her crest up. But then what could be expected of an ancient fog whose custom it ever was to enter a cottage home without previously knocking at the door?

"No; I'm not deaf, doctor, thanky," said she, "though I'm sadly afraid you be yourself, squealing out at a body like a gander on Winterbourne Common! Thank Heaven! my hearing and my memory, too, be both on 'em as good now as they

was when I was a nimble young woman some fifty or sixty year ago. And as for the 'satica, the bottle 'o stuff you sent me yesterday, why, 'tis jest about as powerful, doctor, as a mugful of cold water would be, drawn up by the bucket from the well yonder. Pah!" snorted old Tamar, with measureless disdain.

"You should persevere, Payne! you should persevere!" quavered Dr. Gaunt, leaning his whole weight upon his stick, and with both hands clutching the knob of it, as his habit was, to assist and steady his unmanageable old legs. "You don't give the liniment a fair trial, Payne; you haven't—"

Only at that instant did Dr. Gaunt discern clearly who it was that he had found there at the cottage door in friendly converse with old Tamar Payne. He checked himself then, and turned his back upon his patient forthwith. Taking off his hat with an obsequious flourish, he bowed, with half-closed uncertain old eyes, low to Rudolf De Vere.

"Really, Mr. De Vere, I crave your pardon," he began, with his finest smirk. "I had not the least idea that it was you standing there. I beg to apologise, sir, most sincerely for my—for my—"

"Pray do nothing of the kind; 'tis of no consequence," Rudolf stopped him courteously, with his quiet smile. "And I must say good morning now; I have friends waiting for me at the top of the hill."

But, for certain reasons of his own, Dr. Gabriel Gaunt was loth to lose sight of Rudolf just yet. Here, thought he, with a sort of gleeful spite, was a rare new opportunity of letting in daylight upon the true character of the hateful, haughty colonial adventuress who was then figuring before the world as his good old friend Elizabeth Dawson of The Granary. Rudolf De Vere, he had heard, was an intimate and favoured associate of these people from Santa Rosa; but it was impossible that he—the master of Monkshood—could be aware of the plain unvarnished facts of the case; of the brazen fraud and imposture which

were being enacted so successfully at Oliver Dawson's old home. So Dr. Gaunt made a detaining gesture with his skinny be-ringed hand.

"Pray, one moment, sir!" he exclaimed hastily. "You saw that couple on horseback just now—I mean the titled young whipper-snapper from Winterbourne Chase, and his companion—the person, you know, who has lately appeared at The Granary?"

Rudolf, having found a half-crown or two in his pocket, as a parting present for the aged Tamar, had already shouldered his gun and called his faithful setter to heel preparatory to stepping onward again in the direction of his own house. He turned upon the foolish old Maydew doctor a cold grave glance which encompassed him from head to foot.

"Yes," Rudolf then said; "I saw Mr. Chepstowe, Lord Winterbourne's son, and the lady who was riding with him, the elder Miss Dawson, of The Granary. What of it, Dr. Gaunt? Is the circumstance such a very extraordinary one, then? You appear to think it so, sir," said Rudolf, somewhat more sternly than perhaps he knew.

The doctor's lean legs threatened to give way beneath him. He wagged his wise old head until one would have apprehended that it must roll soon from his hock-bottle shoulders.

"He! he! he!" cackled the ancient scarecrow, "the elder Miss Dawson of The Granary, eh! So, sir, she has bamboozled you, has she, sir, in the same way that she has bamboozled every one else in the neighbourhood—or tried to? He! he! he! I am sorry to hear it, Mr. De Vere; very sorry indeed. 'Tis indeed a grievous thing that a daughter of Oliver Dawson's—poor Oliver, that I knew so well!—should be found in such very doubtful company; and how the unfortunate situation has come about—how the girl herself can submit to such guardianship, or lend herself in any manner to the gross deception of the whole business—I do aver all passes my comprehension! But Miss Susy Dawson is unquestionably living on the best of terms at The

Granary with this shameless creature we are discussing; for I have seen them there together myself, sir!"

It took a good deal in a general way to stagger Rudolf De Vere. But he was undeniably something more than astonished now; though he was careful to repress all outward signs of uneasiness. Indeed, he caught himself regarding critically the pitiable old figure before him, and charitably deciding that Dr. Gabriel Gaunt was either a dangerous lunatic at large, or had learned in his second childhood to get drunk in the morning.

"Why, bless my soul alive," went on the high cracked voice triumphantly, "I knew Elizabeth Dawson before she went out to Santa Rosa Island. We—she and I—were old cronies, sir, sworn cronies always in the old days; and I told that woman to her face, sir, that she was no more my good old friend Elizabeth Dawson of Maydew than she was the man in the moon, sir."

For the life of him, then, Rudolf could not resist putting one brief question.

"And what did she say?" he inquired coolly. "Blasphemed it out, sir, laughed in my face!" screamed Dr. Gabriel Gaunt; "that's what she did, sir! But, egad, I'll be even with her yet. I'll humble her. I'll have my revenge. I'll expose her to the whole county. I'll see whether—"

With an impatient, an authoritative, sidewise movement of the head that was not to be questioned or defied, Rudolf silenced for the moment the violent old gentleman and turned abruptly to Tamar Payne.

The dame meanwhile had been listening "with all her ears" to the queer talk going on between "Mr. Dolfer" and the doctor; though "all her ears" were not much after all; for, despite her indignant protest to the contrary, both the memory and the hearing of the poor old goody were becoming more dim and enfeebled every day. She had listened eagerly enough, however, to all that had been said in her presence; but, in her own pithy phraseology, she could "make neither head nor tail on't."

"Tamar," said Rudolf distinctly, "you are a Maydew woman, you know; and of course you should know and remember all about Maydew people—shouldn't you?"

"Lor' yes, Mr. Dolfer. In course, by birth and by nature, as you may say, I'm a Maydew woman. To be sure I am! Who says I ain't then?" demanded the old woman, with a swift glance of suspicion and hostility at the mincing, smirking, triumphant old man hard by.

"Nobody disputes the fact, my good Payne," he was beginning; but Rudolf cut him short.

"Tamar," De Vere said kindly, "as I daresay you have heard before to-day, after a long absence of eighteen years the Dawson family have at last returned to The Granary, once the farmhouse and homestead of Oliver Dawson, yeoman of Westshire. At least Miss Dawson herself, and her niece Miss Susy Dawson, as she is called, have returned together from across the sea—leaving, alas! their nearest and their dearest in the grave behind them. You follow me, Tamar?"

"Lor' yes, Mr. Dolfer—I've heard that much afore. Gammer Wilson of Maydew she told me about it some time ago, and remarked on't in her gossip way, and said wonderful truly was the workings o' Providence! Yes, 'twas when I met her on Winterbourne Common, and Mrs. Payne says she, 'I s'pose now you have heard o' the—'"

"Well, Tamar," Rudolf broke in gently, "I want you to tell me now, if you can, who were the lady and the gentleman who rode past your house, and who spoke to me just before the doctor here drove up to us, you know, only a few minutes since?"

Tamar looked, as, indeed, she was, somewhat mystified at this seemingly unnecessary and inconsequent catechism. But she answered directly:

"Why, o' course, Mr. Dolfer, the young gentleman he were my Lord Winterbourne's son and heir. You knows him as well as I do. Everybody knows 'un hereabout. And the lady wi' him, why, she were a high-spirited frolicsome female I've more 'an once or twice set eyes on afore, dashing along the turn-pike road here with the gentle-folk from the Chase. She's one o' 'em herself, I make no doubt, Mr. Dolfer; for there'll be

a fine gathering of the quality, they say, a-staying with my lord just now."

"You are mistaken, Tamar. The lady we saw on horseback was Miss Dawson," said Rudolf quietly, almost mournfully. "I am afraid, my old friend, that your memory is not to be depended upon, after all."

"Miss Elizabeth Dawson! the sister, you mean, of Squire Oliver Dawson!" cried Tamar Payne, aghast. "Lord sakes alive, not that, Mr. Dolfer! Pardon an old body like me for saying so—but you must be—be—a-dreaming, sir!"

Rudolf's features all at once seemed to take an anxious and a weary look. His eyes were utterly sad.

"Miss Betty Dawson, as I remember her," cried Tamar, a little derisively it may be, just by way of showing anybody who doubted it that her maligned memory was quite as trustworthy as ever it had been in her best and younger days, "was a short, scraggy, homely figure of a body, as lean as the doctor here, bless ye, sir!—a timid soul, without a bit o' dash or pride or high venturesomeness about her! She'd no more got a-top of a prancing fiery nag at her respectable age, I'll wager a crown, than she'd mount the white bull with a ring through his nose in Lawyer Topham's ten acre field."

"Well, good-bye," said Rudolf absently, pressing his half-crown into the hard and seamed old hand, so gladly and affectionately held out to meet his own. "To put into the cracked china tea-pot, you know," he murmured. "Good-bye, Tamar."

Taking no further notice of Dr. Gabriel Gaunt—it is likely, indeed, that he had utterly forgotten his existence—Rudolf, with his dog at his heels, was marching off; when a yell of victory, it was nothing short of it, accompanied by frantic capering sounds suggestive of some kind of seville war dance, just then reached his ear. He faced round involuntarily.

"He, he, he! I told you, sir, didn't I now, that the woman was an impostor! She's an abandoned adventures, Mr. Rudolf De Vere—that's what she is, sir—I you take my word for it. A creature of no character—a downright scheming improper—"

In an instant Rudolf De Vere was again at the side of the ancient pop; and the old man's squeak and caper of triumph were hushed as speedily. His jaw fell—his marionette-like legs suddenly ceased to perform.

Rudolf with difficulty restrained his fierce anger. His beautiful eyes were dark, stormy, dangerous. The fingers of his strong white hands moved convulsively.

"Miss Dawson," he managed to explain, however, in his own quiet straightforward way, "is a—very dear friend of mine. I count no friend dearer than she. If you were not such a miserably old and defenceless man, Dr. Gaunt, I should without hesitation, and this very moment, sir, knock you head over heels where you stand."

Then in the awed silence that followed, Rudolf whistled to his setter and went.

By-and-by—he could never clearly recall how he gained its solitude—he found himself alone in his private gun-room at the old hall. He placed in a standing rack the gun he had brought home with him, and took mechanically the efrom another—the first, as it chanced, that his hand fell upon.

Almost as a man with wits wandering, or with senses sleep bound, he examined each part of the fowling-piece. Then, resting it stock downward, he leaned his arms and his head upon the double-barrelled muzzle of the deadly thing. "Old enough to be my mother!" reflected he. "Yes, that is what the world would say if it knew—and laugh! Good Heavens, how it would laugh! Yet never mind, Betty, my darling—I love you, Betty—I love you! Your years should be as naught between us when I love you so well, so faithfully, and perhaps so hopelessly, dear! Well, Heaven knows . . . I am not the only fool . . . the only one she has befooled! The lad Colin Chepstowe is years younger than I, poor chap! In his case, I suppose, the world would kindly say, 'Old enough to be his grandmother.' Faugh

—young Colin Chepstowe! He? She never could do it. It is impossible!"

Rudolf, sighing, lifted his head from the ugly twin muzzle, and stared unseeing at the opposite wall.

"I wonder," mused he, uttering his dismal thoughts aloud—"I wonder now whether she would be sorry—whether she would shed a single tear—if I blew my brains out!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A BIRTHDAY TREAT.

There are occasionally days in late September when Summer, cowed and wreathed about with fading garlands and with drooping poppies in her hands, trips back as it were, with a sweet, regretful smile, once more to say farewell—a lingering, mournful farewell!

"Tis true her flowers are scentless and withered—pale ghosts of a happier time—and her smile is dim and sad; yet something of the old wild fragrance, something of the old wild freshness still clings around her gossamer rainbow robes; and her shining yellow tresses, floating upon the soft south wind, have not yet wholly shed and lost the warm wanton radiance of their prodigal youth.

One of these lovely late "good-bye days" of summer was, or at any rate promised to be, the twenty-seventh of September—the birthday of the heir of Winterbourne Chase. Even so early as at breakfast-time, when fine and costly gifts innumerable had been showered from all quarters upon the cheery young hero of the day, the low mists had parted and rolled away, and the high warm sun then flashed out gloriously over the far-reaching and russet-tinted woods below.

"Don't you make too sure, Colin," Lord Winterbourne said, grimly, as young Colin was chirping artlessly of the lucky weather, and at the same time overhauling delightedly his many birthday gifts. "Don't you make too sure, Colin," his lordship said. "I was up before you or anybody else in this house, and saw the sun rise from my dressing-room window. Your mother knows I did. 'A red sky at morning,'—you know the rest, Colin!" his father said, strolling over to a distant sideboard to view the collation thereon.

"Your father, I need scarcely remind you, delights in throwing cold water upon everything that looks promising, Colin dear," Lady Winterbourne remarked equably, seating herself behind the coffee urn—"indeed, I may say everything, and any thing, more especially, of course, if the project or whatever it be, has emanated from myself."

"Jupiter Pluvius, I fancy, Colin, my lad, will throw cold water, as your mother calls it, upon the whole lot of us before the afternoon is over," his lordship said, brandishing a carving knife around a huge sirloin, his back to the chattering crowd of guests at the breakfast-table, who could hear the master of the mansion chuckling at his own witticism.

"It is never wise to prophesy unless you are sure, Colin," observed her ladyship, in the same level tone, dropping sugar into the cups with unruffled calm, "because you are apt to look ridiculous when you turn out to be wrong."

It was the amiable habit of Lord and Lady Winterbourne, whenever together in company, to talk past each other, and over the head of each other as it were, through the medium of any third person present at the time. But nobody minded this slight eccentricity—nobody took the least notice of it; because everybody who knew them and who visited at Winterbourne Chase was perfectly familiar with this remarkable mode of conversation as practised between husband and wife.

"By Jove, mother, ain't it kind of 'em though!" sang out Colin suddenly, his pale pink-rimmed eyes kindling, and his thin tenor rising above the pleasant din of voices going on around him.

"What is it, dear?" Lady Winterbourne inquired.

"From the Misses Dawson. See! I never expected it, by Jove!"

"A joint present, then, is it, Colin dear!" his mother asked in a rather aggrieved tone. She glanced down the long table as she spoke, and at the other end of it she met the sympathetic nod and smile of the Countess of Bearwarden; who with deft fair-plump hands moving busily to and fro, was good-naturedly superintending the big tea urn before her.

"Well, yes—I s'pose that's about it," answered Colin, feeling on reflection a trifle injured too.

It was a beautiful silver hunting-flask; exquisitely chased and monogrammed upon one solid flat side of it; and, un-expected upon the other, a convenient space or box, the invisible lid of which, when a spring was touched, flew open and disclosed a receptacle intended for cigarettes. This morning, from the cunningly concealed cigarette place, a little card fell out, upon which was written in a tantalisingly neat and undistinguishable hand—

"With sincere good wishes and ever kind regards.

"From E. D. & S. D."

And that was all! More than enough, thought poor Colin, and yet not enough! He passed the gift from the ladies of The Granary round the breakfast-table for public approval, and it was voted "good goods" by all straightway.

"I thought of givin' you somethin' very similar myself, Colin," observed Lord Lowater. "Glad I didn't though, now, old man."

"Thanks, dear old boy; but you couldn't have improved upon the tankard if you'd tried," chirped Colin gratefully. "Has everybody seen Lowater's big tankard? I say, ain't it handsome! We'll have it out as a loving-cup at luncheon to-day, and show it to the two Misses Dawson."

"It was the best and the biggest thing of the sort I could get anywhere in Bond street, Colin," murmured the viscount modestly.

Someone—a man—at the countesses's end of the table, having finished breakfast, was glancing, at her ladyship's request, at the columns of the *Times* newspaper. The Countess of Bearwarden wished to know whether there was any news as to—especially in the Births, Marriages, and Deaths.

"Hullo," the news-hunter called out suddenly; and everybody looked expectantly towards him. "Isn't Douglas Rex the literary man now staying with De Vere at Monkshood?" he went on.

"Yes," Lord Lowater was heard to grumble—"a bearded, high-shouldered chap with wildish sort of eyes."

"Egad, then," said the man with the *Times*, "Douglas Rex is in luck! There's a notice of his *Pagan Bride* this morning here—a whole column and more in length. 'Tis the finest bit of sensation, they say, that's appeared for the last ten years."

"Why, the book has been out only three or four days—hardly that, has it?" the countess said, with an amazed stare settling slowly upon her heavy peach-tinted countenance. "Fancy the *Times* noticing the thing so early!" exclaimed she, somehow or other—she could hardly have told why—not altogether delighted at the intelligence.

"It is all Rudolf De Vere's doing, of course," put in Lady Winterbourne sharply. "He knows the man, I'll be bound, who wrote the review, or article, or whatever you call it. Perhaps, indeed, he wrote it himself. They say he's clever—and so I shouldn't wonder."

"What infernal nonsense women chatter sometimes," Lord Winterbourne said sotto voce, with his mouth full.

"We don't deny, do we, Colin?" Lady Winterbourne retorted, turning gently to her son, "that women are sometimes foolish; for we have it on high authority that they were made to match the men."

A pretty young girl, an enthusiastic devourer of fiction good and bad, here cried out—

"Oh, we must get down *The Savage Wife* from Mudge's as quickly as possible, and see—"

"Not *The Savage Wife*—*The Pagan Bride*, dear Miss Larkspur," corrected Miss Larkspur's neighbour, wootingly.

Young Colin was sitting next to the pretty flighty novel-reader, whose father, the well-known Jonas Larkspur, was a city man, and perhaps the wealthiest of his class in London; the daughter, an only child, having, by some odd means or other, been duly presented to her Sovereign during the past season by the always good-natured Countess of Bearwarden.

Wicked tongues, however, were not wanting to declare there was nothing odd or unusual about the affair—only that after that presentation business the Countess herself "sporting" a magnificent diamond tiara, necklace and earrings, which never had been seen adorning her comely person before it. All pure malice of course.

"Oh, *The Pagan Bride*, is it, Mr. Chetpote?" Thanks," returned Miss Larkspur coquettishly. "How thrillingly nice it must be to wake up and discover oneself a really successful author! If I find myself anywhere near Mr. Rex to-day, I shall ask him to describe his sensations."

"The box, you know, is due to-morrow," said Colin, earnestly. "I'll write at once, Miss Larkspur, and tell 'em to be sure and put in a copy or two. Shall I?"

Miss Flossie Larkspur, leaning back in her chair, clasped her hands in her lap with a little ecstatic snarl.

"Oh, Mr. Chetpote, how good of you!" cried she. "Do, by all means. But please tell the Mudge people to put in quite half a dozen sets of the book, or amongst so many girls here there'll be a regular fight for it."

Then, until the morning meal at Winterbourne was ended, the table-talk became general; and the theme of it was *The Pagan Bride* and the fortunate author of the novel.

The hour for the birthday luncheon in Rockstone Forest had been fixed for half-past one o'clock; but it was not until near upon the stroke of two that the expected party was complete at the rendezvous, which was the famous druidical ruin in the heart of the forest that sheltered the equally celebrated wiabing-well.

The Chumleigh girls themselves had merely to stroll from their own gloomy home to the meeting-place on their brother's domain; for Rockstone Forest literally surrounded Rockstone Manor.

Within a stone's jerk of the ruin there was a broad open space, a lovely glade, where stood a mossy hut or grotto with shed attached, built there, in years gone by, by the present Sir Hawke Chumleigh's grandfather expressly for the convenience of his county neighbours who might wish to picnic at any time in his beautiful forest.

Yet more practical and substantial accommodation both for man and beast was afforded by the "Chumleigh Arms"—a commodious, old-fashioned hostelry, standing there upon the rugged confines of the great wood; a wide grassy road winding amongst the trees up to the very door of the inn itself.

Here were to be found spacious old stables and other outbuildings, and a cosy tap-room for waiting servants.

Lady Winterbourne had arranged with the landlord that all carriages and horses whether their own or those of coming friends, should to-day find temporary abiding-place at the "Chumleigh Arms."

Miss Flossie Larkspur, who was very bright and arch on Colin's birthday, averred, however, that she for one did not at all like the look of that sprawling lowly old inn in the forest.

A solitary traveller, she thought, might easily be allured into it, murdered and robbed in his sleep, and the corpse hid for ever in the depths of the wood.

"The place must look awful at dusk with the setting sun behind it!" shuddered Miss Larkspur, very prettily. "I shouldn't a bit wonder, indeed, if a murder had been done there already!" cried she.

Colin, gay in rainbow flannels, soothed her in his own cheery characteristic fashion.

"Perhaps we shall find the unhallowed grave to-day," said he. "Let us go and search for it together, Miss Larkspur, shall we? The innocent blood of a murdered man always 'cries out,' don't you know? Let's go and find his bones."

"By-and-by, Mr. Chetpote," said Miss Larkspur, solemnly. "I declare to you I shall have become too frightened to budge another inch! It looks so awfully dark and still, as it is, there amongst those great old trees yonder."

"Yes; a romantic but a decidedly gloomy spot for a picnic," exclaimed another dame, whom Lord Lowater was lifting bodily from a perilously high and light-built American dog-cart which he had elected to drive on that day.

The Chumleigh girls—five in number—in last year's gowns and vamped-up hats, had already appeared on the scene, and were sitting patiently waiting on the grey Druid stones when the large straggling party from Winterbourne arrived.

"Those poor Chumleigh girls!" kind friends were wont to say of them confidentially; because, although they lived with their mother at Rockstone Manor, the whole six of them dwelt there only on sufferance, and they knew it.

Sir Hawke, the graceless son and brother, the head of the family, might on any day, with merely perchance a warning by telegram, return to the home of his honoured forefathers, bringing with him a gay and nimble Vienna or Paris dancer as the new *châtelaine* of the hoary old manor.

The widowed Lady Chumleigh often sighed dolorously when she heard the great trees roaring and creaking around the mansion, and the shrieking autumn winds dashing wildly the dreached brown leaves against the narrow-tinted casements of the baronial hall. For she remembered that the dower-house, in the damp valley a mile away, was but in sorry plight—scarcely more habitable in fact than the Druid ruin itself.

Sir Hawke spent his annual thousands abroad, whilst his mother and sisters lived upon their yearly hundreds at home.

"We are all here now, I think, except the Misses Dawson, and they are very late," said Lady Winterbourne, encompassing with a quick keen glance the different animated groups near the ruin—some moving slowly amid the monster sun-flecked beech trunks, some resting idly upon the crumbling grey masonry, and others making believe to assist the quiet busy footmen in unpacking the hampers and spreading the cloths.

Here and there fell patches of sunlight dancing, quivering upon the bravery of glass and silver, amongst which figured prominently Lord Lowater's big tankard—his handsome gift of the day to his friend Colin.

"Unquestionably the Misses Dawson are late," Lady Winterbourne said again, now rather anxiously. "I hope no accident has befallen them on the road."

"And Rudolf De Vere and his phalanx of bachelors," cried the countess, bringing into play a gold double eyeglass, with a tortoiseshell handle a foot long, "where are they, I wonder?"

"I declare I had forgotten them," said Lady Winterbourne, curtly.

But even as she spoke the young men from Monkshood were seen advancing leisurely towards the rest of the company; whereupon Lord Winterbourne and the Earl of Bearwarden, with two or three other elderly gentlemen, who were sipping sherry and bitters, and smoking an autopastral cigar, because there was nothing else to do, and mentally anathematising the whole business as a tremendous bore—the certain forerunner of rheumatism and lumbago, and bodily ill perhaps even worse—went forward to meet and welcome Rudolf De Vere and his friends.

They reported that they had passed Miss Dawson and her niece in Rockstone village. The Granary ladies were driving in their brougham.

"By-the bye, they looked out of the window," remarked Douglas Rex absently, as if he were thinking of something else—"at least, Miss Dawson herself did—and said she thought it was going to rain."

"Rain, Mr. Rex!" said Lady Winterbourne scornfully. "Pardon me—that is nonsense."

"Miss Dawson," observed Lord Winterbourne, as if addressing himself to the nearest beech-trunk, "is, I should say, about the most sensible woman in the parish."

"Old men," murmured Lady Winterbourne audibly, turning, with an air of fine resignation, to the fat countess, "are always, my dear friend, out of place at a picnic. I told you so."

"Why, here come the Misses Dawson at last!" exclaimed Viscount Lowater in the next moment.

And young Colin, deserting the side of Miss Larkspur, flew forward instantly to thank Aunt Betty and Susy for the silver flask—and the arch vivacity was quenched for awhile in the eyes and in the breast of Miss Flossie Larkspur.

"Hateful, fast creatures, those two Californian women, or whatever they are and wherever it is they come from!" she breathed to herself, as she watched them. "The aunt is much the worse of the two—ininitely worse. At her age she ought to be ashamed of herself!"

CHAPTER XX.

AND HOW IT WAS INTERRUPTED.

"So sorry to be so late; I do hope that we have not kept you waiting," Aunt Betty was saying meanwhile to no one in particular, as she tripped lithesome hither and thither, shaking hands with every one she knew—with the exception of Rudolf De Vere, whom she adroitly contrived not to see.

There were many charming frocks of divers shell-like hues that memorable day in Rockstone Forest; but not one of the number, in delicacy of taste, make, and furbelow, approached the inimitable style of those worn by the ladies from The Granary.

They knew, too—what woman, indeed, is ever unconscious of such a matter!—that they were far and away the best-dressed women of the company, smart as it was; and this happy consciousness, in no mean degree, perhaps, added to their brightness and the pleasure of the hour.

It is always delightful to wear a becoming gown; doubtless infinitely more so if the innocent garment in question be the means of receiving a less fortunate sister half wild, or "real mad," with envy!

"We took a wrong turning at the cross-roads near Winterbourne Common," Miss Dawson went on to explain sweetly, "and we lost our way for quite half an hour. Do, please, forgive us, dear Lady Winterbourne; it was our misfortune, not our fault, you see. The glass seemed inclined to go back before we started, and so we came in the brougham."

Lord Winterbourne grinned under his grizzled thick moustache, and Lady Winterbourne herself interposed rather nervously,—

"Well, I believe luncheon is ready now; and we have no one else to wait for. Mitchell, is luncheon quite ready?"

"Yes, my lady, quite ready," the man-servant replied, with a last searching glance over the goodly cold feast, to which his subordinates in livery were adding an artistic finishing touch or two.

"Then beat the gong," commanded Lady Winterbourne.

And Mitchell, stepping aside, banged the gong accordingly, and with it made such a far-reaching clamour that, not only did explorers and stragglers and the bored, sherry-bibbing old gentlemen come hurrying up from different quarters to the feeding-place, but the scared pigeons and doves flew headlong therefrom, battering soft frightened wings in their flight against the tough old limbs of the beeches spreading above it.

Some of the wanderers confessed that they had been leaping the neighbouring brook, the pure cold spring water of which would be so handy by-and-by for filling the gipsy-kettles for tea; others had been dropping half-pennies into the wishing-well in the ruins, and wishing desperate tender things with their hands clasped religiously behind them; and some owned boldly that they had, in true 'Arry and 'Arriet fashion, been scribbling their names upon the grotto walls.

"Do, dear Colin, make the very most of your opportunities," his mother had whispered hastily, almost piteously, to him, earlier in the morning. "You will never again have such another chance—never! Half-a-million, my own darling, and every penny of it, they say now, was left to her. Think of it! And—and you're very fond of her,

you know; and—and, Colin dearest, I do not really believe that she is so very old, after all. I'm sure she looks younger than ever to-day."

Colin nodded valiantly, and drew a hard breath. Yes, come what might, he would try his luck to-day—possibly on his birthday Fate might be propitious; and if a fair and fitting opportunity were not forthcoming, why, somehow or other, he would make one; that was all. And as for Rudolf De Vere—Rudolf be hanged! He did not believe she cared a button for Rudolf De Vere now—perhaps never had cared for him. Why, they scarcely ever exchanged a word; in fact, if anything, they seemed downright to avoid, to cut each other, whenever they did happen to meet. Poor blind, foolish, ignorant Colin!

And the Countess of Bearwarden, in similar terms, had preached the folly of procrastination to her dear son Lowater.

"You know you are horribly in debt, my dear," she said cheerfully; "and you know, too, how your father storms and swears. Do try, if you can, to bring matters to a head to-day. On the best authority, let me tell you, I heard only a little while back that the money is all on the niece's side; and surely that is far more likely! The successful sea weed farmer, or guano merchant, or whatever it was the man professed to be, would hardly in reason bequeath his entire fortune to a spinster sister, so long as he had a surviving unmarried daughter to inherit after him. Of course, poor Lady Winterbourne may think what she pleases. I cannot help it, Lowater, if she is off on a wrong scent."

"All right, mother; I believe I'm pretty safe," said Lowater, with beautiful confidence. "I know she likes me; she as good as said so the other day. And I must be a fool if I can't cut out that sulky literary chap—eh!"

"Cut out Douglas Rex! I should rather hope so, dear Lowater," said the countess, proudly.

And so, as Rudolf De Vere held silently and indifferently, not to say haughtily, aloof, Colin Chepstowe had it all his own way, and carried all before him triumphantly. He made Aunt Betty a lovely snug seat with a bear-skin rug among the huge and mossy gnarled beech-roots, and plied her with every good thing, with every ambrosial delicacy, he could forage from the liberal feast.

He purloined a whole bottle of champagne, another of claret, and another of moselle, and hid them all behind the great old tree against which her shoulders leaned so gracefully.

Regardless of trouser-knees, he knelt there before her, bottle in one hand, glass in the other, tempting her with this, persuading her with that; her slightest whim anticipated, her wishes all divined before they found utterance—or Miss Dawson, with an enchanting smile, would hold out to him her plate, and Colin would then furnish it of the best in the most wooing way in the world. Once she said, quite tenderly,—

"Oh, Mr. Chepstowe, do attend to what you are doing, please! You are looking at me, you know, and putting everything into my lap!"

"Then," said Colin, with naive irrelevancy, still kneeling there with a champagne bottle grasped fervidly with both hands, "will you give me the first waltz this evening?"

As Rudolf De Vere was staring moodily just then in their direction, and utterly neglecting a patient Chumleigh girl by whom he chanced to be seated, Miss Dawson said emphatically,—

"I shall be so pleased!"

And a singular circumstance was that when Colin next spoke to Miss Flossie Larkspur, she turned her shoulder abruptly towards him, pretended indeed not to hear him, and laughed immoderately at a rapid story which a certain Captain Robinson—one of the Monkshood bachelors—was trying hard to tell her properly.

The straw-haired viscount, on the other hand, was finding matters by no means so simple and uncontested. Douglas was not to be ousted or frightened by black looks from the side of the charming Susy.

"Oh, Mr. Rex!" the young girl said, "how can I ever thank you sufficiently for your kind present—I mean that copy of *The Pagan Bride*! I shall value it always—believe me, always!"

"You have thanked me more than sufficiently already—I mean, by that dear note of yours;

and I shall never destroy it. I shall keep it, treasure it, as long as I live."

Douglas's deep, wild eyes glowed, and Susy blushed.

"I think," said she, "that the plot is one of the cleverest, if not the cleverest, I ever came across in fiction; and in parts it is exquisitely pathetic. I am near the end of the second volume, and I find it so absorbing, so terribly exciting, that I could hardly put it aside this morning when it was time to dress and start for the picnic."

"God bless you, dear," said Douglas, very low. "And I have seen the *Times*," went on Susy rapidly, "and of course you have read it too—and oh, Mr. Rex, I am so glad! They say that a good notice in the *Times* is always —"

"I say, Miss Susy, let me find you a decent seat," Lord Lowater interposed at this juncture, elbowing his way almost roughly between Susy and Douglas Rex.

"Thank you. I am going to sit here, Lord Lowater," replied Susy gently. "Mr. Rex, you see, has turned this wine-case upside-down, and covered it with his overcoat; and it will do beautifully in this way—so!"

She was quietly firm; in fact, speaking, she had settled herself upon the wine-case in question, and would change neither her mind nor her situation; although Lowater did his hardest with his somewhat limited vocabulary to allure her from the neighbourhood of Douglas Rex. That, however, was not to be done.

"Confound the fella," growled the viscount under his yellow moustache. "The — presumption of these literary chaps!"

And thus he had to content himself as best he could for the time. Nevertheless it was a merry meal for all concerned—a right goodly feast. Corks went popping gaily, and the rich wine flowed copiously; jealous hearts for a while forgot their ache and pain, and poor simple Lord Lowater burned no longer to spill the life-blood of Douglas Rex.

Nobody cared a rap, though strange creatures of the insect kingdom, lean and fat, slow and nimble alike, dropped from the boughs overhead and drowned themselves in champagne, and floundered in the salad-dressing; whilst ants and earwigs raced now and then across the tablecloth, and the good-humoured Countess of Bearwarden sat down unexpectedly in a dish of Venice cream. But then one is prepared for disasters of the kind at a picnic—they are part of the fun of the thing, particularly for lookers-on.

And nobody noticed that a strong warm wind was rising, and travelling with a ceaseless murmuring sound through the glades and hollows of Rockstone Forest, like the mysterious hissing whisper of a stormy in-crawling sea—that the great old wood had a threatening aspect and was growing gradually very dim.

Miss Flossie Larkspur, who was, or affected to be, in the wildest spirits, was asking, like Rosa Dartle, "for information." She said that she wanted to know what became of all the half-pennies dropped by silly people into the Druids' Well?

"There must be a regular copper-mine down there by this time," cried she—"mustn't there?"

But her chatter was drowned in the loud voices of some of the younger men who were setting to work hilariously to brew a loving-cup in Lord Lowater's big tankard. Colin Chepstowe's health and good luck must be drunk therefrom, everyone agreed enthusiastically.

Ere tankard and napkin, however, could be started upon their journey, great rain-drops as big as hazel nuts splashed down through the leaves upon the startled company below.

Lord Winterbourne laughed aloud unkindly.

"What did I tell you, my lady?" called out he, for the first time that day addressing his wife directly.

Before she could hit him back, as it were, the very earth beneath them quivered and groaned. The wind uprose, grew in wild strength, and roared with awful suddenness amid the creaking mighty branches; and the splitting crack and

fury of heaven's own artillery broke at that instant through the murky sky.

It was the doom, the death-knell, of that long and lovely summer!

Lord Winterbourne, satyr-like, laughed again.

But some of them thought tremblingly of the earthquakes on the Riviera, and others of the Last Day. A horrid blinding zigzag rod of deadly pale steel-blue flame darted serpent-like amongst the glass and silver. Then followed a smell of sulphur, and a very hurricane of wind and rain together.

Soon came another terrific brain-splitting crack, and blackest, deadliest rumbling.

Then followed panic and stampede!

(To be continued.)

OLGA'S AFFLICTION.

—:—

CHAPTER XIII.

Two days had winged by busily enough for Morgan Adeson and Neil Stuart. Uncle Dacre's will had been carefully examined, and the detectives visited who had inquired for old Dacre Hartley's daughter and her descendants. The two friends heard all there was to hear, which was little more than has already been related; for with the marriage of Marion to Jasper Grant, and the subsequent birth of the daughter, whose name was not recorded, the clue had come to an abrupt termination.

Stuart had seen lawyers, only to hear from them the opinion that there was little to be done but to transfer the property to the charities named, provided he had determined to stick to his intention of not uniting himself to the granddaughter of Hartley; but he was urged so strongly to do so by both his attorney and his friend that he lost his temper at last, and—well, his language was not altogether fit for repetition, though allowable, I believe, among men.

At any rate, he accompanied Morgan Adeson home, both of them in about as uncomfortable a humour as they often found themselves.

They sat for a long time in Morgan's smoking-room—as luxurious a one as London could boast—without speaking, but only drawing, almost savagely, upon a couple of weeds, when Morgan broke the silence. He was looking from the window, his eyes clouded, his brow drawn to a straight line, feeling more irritation than he ever remembered to have felt in his life before, and it was perfectly apparent in his voice as he exclaimed,—

"Curse that woman!"

"What woman are you speaking of?" demanded Neil stiffly.

"That one up there in the country. She was not what she seemed. Her voice was like the ripple of the brook that flowed there upon the hillside; her hair was like the sun at harvest-time; her form would have put Juno's to the blush, and her manners were as perfect, as full of exquisite grace, as those of Lallah Roukh; but—"

Neil interrupted him with a laugh. Morgan started and frowned as if he had been struck.

"Pon my word, old fellow," cried Neil, merrily, "if I did not know you to be the most unselfish man alive, I should say that you were envious of me, and that you were in love with Olga yourself."

"I?"

"Yes."

"You are mad! I should as soon think of falling in love with the female orang-outang at the menagerie!"

"What do you mean?"

Neil had straightened up angrily, but suddenly remembering his promise, Morgan sprang to his feet. He placed his hand on his friend's shoulder, while a dark flush burned in his cheeks.

"Forgive me, Neil!" he exclaimed. "I forgot what I was saying. There are reasons why I—why I can't say to you what I want to, old man; but—but you must not go back there again. Oh, Neil, I wish someone had shot me before I ever took you to that infernal place."

Neil had grown a shade whiter.

"You have said that several times now, and I must insist upon your explaining yourself," he said, slowly. "You know that I love Miss Bretherton. You know that she is—that she has promised to be my wife. If there is any reason why she should not be, other than this cursed money, it is time that you had told me. I am not a boy, Morgan. If I am blind, I am not a thing of so small a mind that I must be told whom I must marry and whom I must not. You have chosen to be most uncomplimentary, even insulting, in your remarks of a lady whom I have every reason to revere and esteem most of any woman in the world, and I must ask you either to explain them or to tell you that my friendship can no longer be yours. I should not deserve your respect if I acted otherwise."

"Don't say that, Neil!"

"You force me to."

"I promise you that—No, hang it all! I can't promise it! I can't see you marry her and—If you would only promise me that you will do nothing until after your sight is restored! Neil, I must tell you. I—"

But before he could complete the sentence there was a knock upon the door, and, glad of the respite that the few moments offered him, he cried out,—

"Come in!"

His servant entered with a tray upon which two letters were lying.

"Letters, sir."

Morgan took the letters and the servant retired.

He looked at the superscriptions curiously. They were in the same writing—a lady's penmanship which he had never seen before.

"Will you excuse me," he asked of Neil, "while I look at these?"

"Certainly."

He sat down, threw one letter on the table, and broke the seal of the other. A little exclamation passed his lips as he read the name, but after one quick glance at Neil he threw his eye over the contents of the letter as hastily as possible.

He crushed it in his hand, and pushing the damp hair back from his forehead, he ejaculated, half unconsciously,—

"Good heavens!"

Neil lifted his head, which had been leaning upon his hand.

"What is it?" he asked, a little of Morgan's excitement communicating itself to him.

There was a momentary silence; then, striving to control his voice, but not succeeding particularly well, he leaned toward Neil.

"Neil!" he cried, "is it true that you were married to Miss Bretherton the night before we left there?"

Neil coloured.

"Why do you ask that?" he demanded.

"Because the letter that has been brought to me is from her."

"And she told you that?"

"She did."

"It is true; but I fail to see why she should have made you her confidant."

"True!"

"Yes."

"What a strange world this is!" half musingly.

Then he arose and walked hastily several times up and down the floor. He stopped at last at Neil's side and placed his hand upon the blind man's shoulder.

"I am going to read you this letter, Neil," he said, slowly. "She did not intend that I should, but I see no better way than that. Will you listen?"

Neil nodded.

Morgan drew up a chair, and seating himself directly in front of his friend, as a woman does when a confidence is about to be exchanged, he read aloud from the letter, which he still held in his hand:

"MY DEAR MR. ADESON,—The greatest trial of my life has been gone through, and my reason is unimpaired. I don't know whether to be grateful or to rebel against that fate which com-

pels me to remember. You know to what I refer: it was saying farewell to the one who is dearer to me than life—Neil Stuart, your friend, my lover. I linger over that word, because in all my life I never possessed one before, and in all my life I never shall possess one again. Perhaps I should have loved him less if he had not been blind; but the fact of his being unable to see the terrible affliction that has made a tragedy of my existence—the knowledge that I was the perfect thing, to him, at least, that others are—made him a god to me, and I worshipped him.

"But it was not to inflict you with my sentimental regrets that I asked you for your address and that I am writing to you to-day. Let me tell it to you in a few words as I can. You remember the day of your arrival, and your conversation with Neil there under the trees? I was an inadvertent listener to that conversation. You told Neil of his uncle's will. You spoke to him of his need of the money that was rightfully his, and of the necessity for him to marry the granddaughter of Dacre Hartley in order that he might secure it. Do you remember what followed that conversation? He left us there, you and me, and you told me that I never could marry Neil; that, even if I could give back to him all the money that he would lose, and twice as much again, I could not be his wife, because his sight had been promised him in the autumn, and that if he should ever see me he would despise me.

"You meant to be kind, but I think that sentence killed in me all the elements that suffer.

"But it did not kill my love for Neil. That night I persuaded him to marry me; that night I became his wife. Not that I might inflict him with my presence, but only that I might give to him the fortune that has been his in thought for so many years, and which he needs so much more than I, for I am the granddaughter to whom old Dacre Hartley referred in his will. I enclose in another envelope the certificate of my mother's marriage to my father, Jasper Grant, the certificate of my birth and later baptism, or christening, and the certificate of my mother's second marriage to Charles Bretherton, whose name I assumed.

"It can all be easily verified, and will give to Neil that which is rightfully his.

"And now I am leaving to you the most sacred thing upon earth to me—the saying goodbye to him. Tell him not to seek me out, for he could not find me—that this farewell is eternal. Tell him the truth of the curse that rests upon my life. Tell him that to the end he shall be my idol, but that I could not risk the look of shame, of repulsion, that would come into his eyes when their sight should be restored and he should look into my ruined face.

"I have not the courage to say farewell to him myself, but you will do it for me, and I am sure you will make him understand it all. Your very cruelty to me has made me trust you, since I know that you will shrink from nothing in the performance of your duty for friendship's sake.

"An eternal farewell to you and him, and Heaven bless you both.

OLGA STUART."

Morgan dropped the letter. The sightless eyes before him were fixed and strained, the hands were clinched.

"What is it that she means, Morgan? For Heaven's sake, explain it all to me!" cried Neil, hoarsely.

CHAPTER XIV.

MORGAN ADESON heaved a long sigh before replying to his friend's question, then he got up and walked hurriedly up and down the floor. His head seemed to be in a whirl. The second reading of the letter affected him more than the first had done. That strange sympathy for Olga was again stealing over him, even at that distance. He felt her remarkable magnetism even in her penned words. He fancied he could hear her voice speaking the sentences that she had written; and then suddenly, as if in a vision, he saw her as he had seen her that night upon the balcony, with her eyes heavenward, the scar upon her cheek concealed.

He felt for a moment that he couldn't reply to Neil's question; but just then the revulsion came as it had come that night upon the balcony when she turned her face full upon him, and he shuddered and drew back as he had done then.

He put his hand upon Neil's shoulder almost savagely.

"I promised her that I would never speak of it to you upon the morning that she drove me from the station to her home!" he cried, in a heavy, unnatural voice; "but she has removed the bans of silence herself; she has asked it of me. Listen: You believe Olga Bretherton to be beautiful. Stuart, she is terrible in her ugliness! You have heard of the death's head? She is like that. No, even that is not enough. It is awful—awful! There are no words that could ever describe her to you, and —"

He couldn't finish the sentence. He broke off with a little gesture, and turned aside, gnawing his moustache fiercely. His face was deathly white, with spots of crimson in either cheek.

Neil sat motionless. He was stunned, white-lipped. He heard the quick tread of the nervous feet as one hears when under the influence of a strong opiate that induces coma rather than sleep.

And then a flash of thought and remembrance came to him, bringing no light, however, and he said, as if speaking a dull reflection to himself,—

"You said her eyes were like bits of porcelain, that her hair was like the sun at harvest-time, and —"

Morgan stopped again in his walk and threw out his hand deprecatingly.

"It is true," he cried heavily. "She is like the completed Milo until—until —"

"What?"

"You see her full in the face."

"But what is it?"

"A scar—a hideous, awful scar that seems to glow and throb against her white flesh like a flame from hell!"

"A scar?"

"It sounds so weak and vapid in describing the terrible curse that lies upon her like the scarlet letter seared by the hand of Heaven. It seems almost a living, breathing thing caressing her with horror. You have shrunk with loathing from the snake-charmer who stands before you with the head of the serpent pressed against her cheek; and yet it is not so ghastly a spectacle as this."

Neil shuddered. He was even whiter than before. He leaned forward, and his arms rested upon his knees, his hands clapping each other between them, his sightless eyes fixed upon Morgan's face.

"What—caused it?" he asked, at last, faintly.

"I never had the courage to ask her."

They sat there silently staring at each other. Morgan noticed that his friend breathed quicker than usual, that there was a heavy moisture upon his brow, and with a curious movement he crossed to the window and threw it open wider.

"The air is stifling," he said huskily.

He stood there leaning against the casement, looking down into the street, and then suddenly, without any reason given to himself for his act, he returned to Neil and sat down opposite him. He did not touch him. It seemed such a curious thing, but somehow he seemed to shrink from the old friend he had loved so well.

His voice was heavier and more husky as he asked:

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know: I have not thought," answered Neil, stupidly. "I seem to be in a maze, turning round and round in the same spot, without mental power to find my way. Help me."

It was almost like the wistful cry of a child, and Morgan's lips compressed.

"I can't," he answered, dully. "No one can help you in this. She wished me to tell you the truth, and I have done it. She is your wife, and —"

"Yes, she is my wife," Neil interrupted.

Morgan looked at him sharply.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I mean," answered Stuart, rising and groping his way toward the window, "I mean that you have told me my duty in that sentence. She is my wife. I have taken her for better, for

worse; and because the worst has come so soon is no reason why I should desert her. She is my wife, Adeson.

He never looked so helpless nor so hopeless as he stood there, with the air blowing the dark hair back from his fair brow. The very stretching out of his hands to find his way would have touched one, but his expression was the most pathetic.

Morgan's heart gave a great bound; a quick colour sprung into his cheeks. He could not comprehend his own emotions. He leaned forward in his chair, and then, as if putting a strong restraint upon himself, he shoved his hands into his pockets and tilted his chair backward, his eyes fixed upon Neil's profile.

There was excitement in the tones of his voice as he exclaimed:

"Does that mean that you are going to claim her?"

Neil wheeled round. He had lost the helpless look, and there was an expression of strong determination about his mouth.

"Yes!" he cried, a dozen exclamations points in voice and manner—"yes! Does the fact of there being a scar upon my wife's face give me reason for deserting her? I was a weak fool for a moment; my love of beauty was stronger than my sense of right. I shall go to her at once, Adeson."

There was another silence, and then, acting under some impulse which he could not name, Morgan rose and laid his arm around his friend's shoulder.

"But your sight, Neil," he said, gently: "what of that? Oh, old friend, I love you and I know you! We have grown together from childhood, and no brother could love you more than I. I seem to know every secret of your heart and every thought of your brain. Don't deceive yourself, Neil. You have grown up with this love of ideal beauty the strongest sentiment of your poet's mind. You have weaved a garland of romance about her personality that even the truth which I have told you can not quite annihilate. You still love your ideal. It is your ideal who remains your wife. But it will be so different when your sight is restored, old fellow! When you see her as she is, what then, Stuart?"

The blind man sighed.

"Heaven knows," he answered, faintly. "I know my own weakness as well as you do, but I know also my strength; and whatever I may feel, I shall know what my duty is."

Morgan drew back, a look of something that resembled disappointment crossing his brow.

"Do you think that she would be satisfied with less than your love, Stuart?" he asked, in a curiously softened tone.

"I will give her all that I can, Adeson," answered the blind man. "I can do no more. She will have fidelity, at all events."

"Fidelity—of the body," said Morgan, dreamily. "I wonder if a woman with her voice would be satisfied with that!"

"Poor little Olga!"

There was something very like a sob in Neil's voice as he said the words, and Morgan's hand closed over his.

"Yes, poor little Olga!" he repeated. "Five minutes ago you asked me to help you. I wish to Heaven I could help her! I know so well what it is to be. You will despise her when you have once looked upon her face. You will loathe her when you see her as she is, and watch even the animals shrink from her as she approaches them. And your duty will die, murdered by your horror. Then what will become of Olga?"

Neil's lip trembled.

"Suppose—I never should see?"

Morgan threw out his hands.

"It would be worse—worse!" he cried. "You would be eternally haunted by a spectre; you would have the glare and the heat of perdition about you every hour of your life; you would grow to hate her because she had deprived you of your sight, even if for nothing else. Neil! Neil! if only I knew you less well, I might trust in it all; but I see it now as I shall then."

Neil moistened his white lips. He did not resent what his friend had said, because he

recognized the truth of it all but too clearly. He was silent for a moment, then he said hoarsely,—

"It is too late to draw back now, even if I would. She is my wife. I will do my duty, and pray Heaven that if the worst come, at least I can conceal it from her. I will do the best I can, Morgan."

Morgan wrung his hand with unconscious firmness.

"Heaven bless you and help you to succeed!" he said below his breath.

CHAPTER XV.

THERE WAS NEVER a wilder or more rugged spot than the one that Olga chose for their future home.

It was a plain little cottage by the sea, where the waves broke with lashing fury against giant rocks that formed the base of huge precipices, and rolled back again in foaming rage. She could lie in her own room during the long hours of the night and listen to the sound which seemed to, in some measure, soothe the seething unrest that filled her soul.

During the first weeks of her stay there she did little else than wander down the rocks and sit there motionless for hours, thinking out her own thoughts. She had grown silent, morose, and white-lipped, until her mother, looking on without daring to question, realized that something must be done to save the girl's reason.

"Heaven help her!" she would murmur, as from some covert place she watched the strange, quiet figure. "I see how it is. I must arouse her in some way. I must—I must! But how? I dare not write to this man who has caused it all. I dare not answer any of the advertisements that have appeared in the daily papers from time to time, so evidently addressed to her. But I must do something. What shall it be?"

For days she could find no solution to her problem, until at last it came to her with a suddenness that made her desperate.

They were rapidly consuming the little capital that had been left when their home had been sold, and the end was almost there. Mrs. Bretherton was startled, alarmed, when she discovered how nearly penniless they were; and then, as reflection slowly opened the true situation to her, her brow cleared.

"It is Heaven's own way of saving my child," she cried. "It has sent the answer to my question at last!"

She arose at once and wrapped a scarf about her head, for the autumn days were growing chill, and went out and down the little path that she had seen Olga pursue each weary day.

It was only a little distance to the cliff, and she paused and looked down.

The girl sat there upon a great boulder, half way between land and sea, motionless as the rock that supported her. The billows broke a few yards below her with a noise and crash that was deafening, but apparently she did not hear. A sea-gull breasted the waves at a little distance, and upon it her eyes were fixed, heavy and unlighted.

There was a storm brewing. The clouds, smoky and threatening, hovered dangerously near the earth, and the wind swept her yellow hair, that had come unloosed about her shoulders, in golden swirls. Her hands were clasped about her knees. She was like the storm nymph perched there among the rocks.

Mrs. Bretherton shuddered as she saw her, and called aloud; but her voice was not to be heard against the voice of wind and sea, and so she clambered laboriously down. She had placed her hand upon the girl's shoulder before Olga knew that there was a human presence near.

She looked up and smiled mirthlessly.

"It is grand, is it not?" she asked.

"Yes, it is grand; but there is to be a storm. Can't you see? Come in!"

"The storm will not break for half an hour yet. Let us enjoy it while it lasts."

There was an expression so curious in the

eyes as they wandered up towards the darkening clouds, that Mrs. Bretherton shivered again.

"You had better come!" she exclaimed, persuasively.

"No. You go back if you are afraid. You will take cold."

"I have a shawl and you have nothing. Won't you come?"

"No."

"Then at least move up here where the rock will protect you."

Olga endeavoured to conceal the annoyance of her countenance, but did as she had been requested. She moved to a position where an overhanging rock gave protection against storm and wind, and Mrs. Bretherton sat down beside her. It seemed to deaden the sound of the waves somewhat, and they sat there for a moment listening intently; then Olga put her hand upon her mother's knee.

"Why did you come?" she asked. "There was something that you wished to say to me?"

"Yes; but this is not the time to say it. Wait until we are at home."

"There is no place like this," answered Olga, slowly. "It gives me courage to bear all there is to bear."

Mrs. Bretherton looked into her daughter's eyes, and shivered again. Her lips grew white and trembled. How the girl had changed! It had been bad enough before, but it was worse now. And yet, somehow, she dared not question her. She dared ask nothing of that past from which she seemed so completely cut out. She took the girl's small, beautiful hands in her own and held them closely.

"Darling," she said tenderly, "I have come to tell you of a calamity that is about to befall us. You don't know how I hate to worry you with more trials than you already have to bear, but this is a misfortune that must be faced."

"What is it?"

There was no emotion, scarcely even interest in the question. The eyes were again upon the gull that hovered above the billows, and Mrs. Bretherton looked in the same direction as if fascinated by the strange gaze.

Unconsciously her voice had assumed the same tone that her daughter's held, and she said in the same dull and spiritless way,—

"It is poverty. The money is almost gone. There are only a few shillings left, dear, pitifully few. We can't starve. What are we to do, Olga? Either you or I must do something."

The gull looked less helpless than either of them for a moment, and then Olga's eyes turned upon her.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" she said, gently. "I had forgotten. You should have understood that I had forgotten. I shall not let you starve, mother."

"Oh, darling, why do you put it like that? Can't you see that—"

"Hush! I have not seemed to see anything, but I see it all clearly enough now. It only required a word. I have been the most selfish thing alive; but, mother—mother, it has not been I. It is this—this!"

She touched the scar upon her face as she spoke, shrinking from her own contact with it as if she had been another person.

Mrs. Bretherton drew the hand down and kissed it.

"I know," she said, softly. "Do you think it necessary to explain to me? I would give my own life so gladly if I could wipe it out, but it is against the will of Heaven dear, and we must try not to rebel; we must face the inevitable, and do it as bravely as we can."

"Yes; I understand that. How much money have we left?"

"Not more than enough to last us a month longer."

The question was answered timidly, fearfully; but Olga did not seem to shrink from it.

"A month!" she repeated, dully.

She leaned her head back against the rock and closed her eyes. The weather-beaten relic of nature's self was not more haggard and grey. Mrs. Bretherton drew closer to her and slipped her arms about the girl's waist.

"What shall you do, Olga?" she whispered.

Olga did not answer at once. Her lips looked blue and stiff, and it was difficult for her to force them into the formation of words.

"I don't know," she answered, at last. "Let us wait. Heaven has seemed to have deserted me for so long that perhaps it will help me now."

"Then you promise me that you will try?"

"I will try."

She had not opened her eyes. Mrs. Bretherton was looking at her almost with bated breath, and yet an expression of relief that was pitiful crept into her countenance.

At that moment a great splash of rain fell at her feet.

"Olga," she said, "the storm has broken."

"Yes," answered the girl, drearily, "the storm has broken."

There seemed to be some meaning in the words deeper than the surface, and Mrs. Bretherton kissed again the hand she held.

"But it will not last," she said, hopefully.

"The deluge is past, dear, and Heaven sent the rainbow as a sign unto us. Come. You owe a duty to your mother, Olga, and to yourself. See, the rain is coming in torrents. Let us go."

Olga arose. A faint colour came into her cheeks as she looked at her mother, then she turned and went lightly up the boulders, giving her mother a hand to assist her. It was not enough under the wind that swept them, and she put her arm about the slender waist and lifted her as she might have done a child. She set her upon her feet upon the top of the largest rock, and smiled more naturally than she had done in weeks.

"There!" she exclaimed. "I am not much larger than you, but, after all, I am a very great deal stronger. I shall take care of you, never fear."

And then, alone in the silence of her own room, listening again to the breaking of the billows, she leaned her hot forehead against the cool glass of the window and said aloud,—

"I have robbed her of the fortune that was rightfully hers, to give it to the man I loved. I must make it back for her. I dare not let her suffer. I must make it back. But how!—how!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE rooms that served as editorial-rooms of the "— Magazine" were not attractive ones, and yet the standing of the magazine and the class of its readers were second to none. The contributors naturally ranked high as they must under those circumstances, and the articles were usually passed upon by several of the editors before they were thought safe to publish in the columns of London's most choice periodical.

Before one of the desks a man sat in a huge revolving-chair. He had turned half around, and was looking interestedly into the eyes of an associate editor, the other man standing above him, and holding in his hand a manuscript that was no longer cleanly. It was thumbed at the corners, and marked with a blue pencil in a few places; but both men looked upon it with curious intent.

"I consider it the strongest article that has ever been presented to us," the man in the chair said, wearily lifting the dark hair from his temples. "It a marvellous thing. The man who wrote it will never do anything stronger."

"That is the singular part of it," said the other. "I don't believe a man has written it."

"What?"

"My impression is that a woman is the author of it."

"Boosh! No woman ever wrote it; no woman ever could write it. It is one of the most logical things that I have ever read."

"And one of the most bitter. Does that very fact convey nothing?"

"No! I would wager my head no woman ever wrote it."

"Wager something that is not impossible and I will go you."

"Make it what you like."

"Very well; a hundred even."

"All right. How is it to be decided?"

"I'll tell you. Morris has written to the author, be it man or woman, to come to the office, and 'It' has refused. Morris is most anxious to secure 'It' as a regular contributor, at almost any salary that can be named, but, of course, wants to make the best terms possible. You know he is about a personal interview with his contributors. He asked me to go on there to see this person, and do what is possible to get a contract. Morris believes that he or she, whichever it may be, does not yet know his or her own value, and that better terms could be made now than at any future time. I am not exactly partial to trotting about the country in search of writers that desire to remain *incog.*; but I am willing to break the rule this time and see what this person is like, man or woman."

"But what reason have you for thinking it a woman, other than the bitterness of it?"

"That is the queer part of it. I don't know; and yet there is a strain in it that reminds me somehow, though in such an indefinite way, that I can't even describe it, of a—a woman whom I once knew."

The man in the revolving chair smiled.

"A romance?" he queried, chaffingly.

The other coloured dully. He did not meet the dark eyes that were fixed upon him, but turned away, and with elaborate care laid the manuscript upon the top of the desk.

"No," he answered, after a perceptible pause. "I have never had a romance in my life. I have never even imagined myself in love with a woman."

"You are a curious fellow, Adeson. But I say, going back to the sexless writer of this article, how do you propose to decide your bet? If it should be a woman, and she really does wish to remain *incog.* she will not admit you when you call."

"If I find that there is anything of that kind attempted, you may be certain that I will outwit her."

"Not the person, be it man or woman, who wrote 'Graves.'"

"A good General sometimes resorts to strategy. He or she has refused to come to London. I shall ask Morris to say nothing of my going there, make no announcement of the fact whatever, but simply carry my credentials with me."

"Are you sure you know the correct post-office address?"

"If it should prove not to be I shall do a little detective work on my own account."

"Then let us make the bet a trifle more liberal: the loser pays all expenses."

"That goes."

"When will you start?"

"To-morrow morning. The sooner the better, as Morris is restive."

"Let me describe to you what you will find: a man, a trifle beyond middle age, living the life of a recluse entombed in tomes. You'll find that a terrible sorrow has shattered him, and that he lives alone in that past that murdered him. He has no ambition. He has written 'Graves' simply because he *had* to write it. It was eating his heart out. He feels better for having written it. He has found a confidant in his pen, that voiceless, yet clarion-tongued betrayer, and he may add to 'Graves' for the same reason that he wrote it. He doesn't want fame. I doubt even if he wants money. He will turn you out when you go to invade his privacy, and he will serve you right."

Morgan Adeson did not reply. He had listened curiously, but as Gordon Lindsay finished speaking, he walked to the window and looked out.

The view was not attractive. The glass was smoky, and reflected only the tops of chimneys and a few windows even more dingy than that, where an occasional man might be seen writing, in his shirt-sleeves.

He drummed upon the glass for a few minutes, and then he turned back and looked at Lindsay. The editor had picked up the manuscript and was absorbed.

Morgan retraced his steps and leaned upon the desk.

"Perhaps you are right," he said, when Lindsay looked up. "It may be as you say. Somehow, I hope it is! There is something in the

confounded article that fascinates me as I see it has fascinated you, and, remarkably enough, it has made me as nervous as a woman. I am half inclined to call the bet off."

He laughed shortly, and Lindsay joined with much more mirth.

"If it should by any chance be a woman," he said, still smiling, "let me make a prediction. You are in love with her writing. You will love her, and you will marry her."

Morgan started and turned a trifle paler.

"Heaven forbid!" he exclaimed, heavily. "Nothing could ever induce me to marry; but, under no circumstances would it ever be that woman."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I—I feel absurdly curious about it. I understand now how it is that a woman can become hysterical. I am as imaginative as—a novelist. Well, good-bye, old man."

"You are going home now?"

"Yes."

"And you go to see 'Graves' to-morrow?"

Morgan hesitated, then a curious expression of resolution, to be induced by so paltry a reason, crossed his face.

"Yes," he answered.

"Good-bye. Remember what I have said."

"I shall remember."

Morgan took the manuscript with him, and left the room. He did not go to find Morris, as he had intended doing, but wrote him a note instead, telling him to have the papers ready on the following morning, as he had decided to go to see the author of 'Graves' himself on the morrow. He felt guilty, somehow, as he gave the note into the hands of the office boy. He did not wait for an answer, but strolled out and on towards his home.

He did not even tell his valet what it was that he contemplated doing, but thrust a few things into a travelling-bag himself, and then sat down with his pipe.

He had smoked only a few moments when Neil Stuart was admitted. Somehow the visit annoyed him, and it was not until his old friend was leaving that he mentioned that contemplated visit to the country.

"Out of town at this time of the year?" echoed Neil. "What for?"

"On a matter of business entirely. Morris has asked me to go, and I am going."

"How long are you going for?"

"I don't know—a day or two—perhaps three."

"I should like to go with you. I—"

"Don't think of it, old man!" cried Morgan, almost too eagerly. "I wouldn't have you for anything. I don't know the place at all, nor anything about the accommodations."

"You know I would not care for that. I believe the change would do me good. I saw Selby, to-day, Morgan."

"What did he say?"

"The operation is to be performed next Wednesday."

"Next Wednesday?"

"Yes. You will be here to be with me, will you not, old fellow?"

"You know I will."

"Thank you, and good night."

And Morgan let him go without further remark, unable, for some unexplainable reason, to find anything to say.

It was noon two days later when he arrived at the little station which the 'Unknown' had designated as Ashleigh. He walked into a tiny shop that bore the words Post Office over the door.

A little box, pigeon-holed for letters, occupied one end of the counter and some dry goods lay upon the other. Behind the dry goods a man stood.

"Are you the postmaster?" Morgan asked.

"I be," answered the man.

"You have a resident here whose correspondence is addressed to Guy Marchmont?"

"Yes. She lives down in the cottage near the cliffs; but it's a long walk, stranger, an' there ain't no conveyance run' here."

Morgan had heard little else than the pronoun; but, after a momentary silence, he said,—

"Can you point out the direction to me?"

CHAPTER XVII.

THERE WAS a sort of quivering sensation in Morgan Adeson's breast, in the region of the heart, for which he could in nowise account.

He took a cigar from his pocket and lighted it; then, as leisurely as if he had not a thought in the world beyond his own pleasure, he strolled down the country road. There was no evidence in countenance or tread of that curious sensation that disturbed him. His thumbs were caught, hook-fashion, in the pockets of his trousers, and his eyes were slightly closed to avoid the smoke, as he changed his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other and back again.

"It is an infernally dusty road!" he commented, mentally, more for the purpose of diverting his own thoughts than anything else. "They need rain badly in these parts, and I shouldn't wonder if they had it before long from the appearance of those clouds over there. By Jove! listen to the sea roar! It might be much pleasanter walking over there. I think I'll try it, at all events. There is no especial hurry about reaching the home of the 'Unknown,' and, hang me, if I don't dread it more the nearer I approach it! Heigh-ho! I have come to the conclusion that a man can be a greater fool than a woman sometimes, more superstitious, more full of idiotic fancies. By Jove! what an ideal place for the author of 'Graves' to live near!"

He had averted from the direct road, and was standing upon the rocks overlooking the precipice that fell to the sea. The waves were lashing and fretting in turbulent fury, angrily licking the huge boulders that seemed to defy them, many feet below where Morgan stood. The wind was coming up, and again the gull's breasts almost touched the leaping water as they sailed onward in their weird flight, falling and rising like the tones of some wild and fanciful melody.

Morgan pushed back his hat and stood there. Some of the curious bitterness that had so impressed him in 'Graves' arose in his heart, and he was about to turn away to escape his haunting spectre, when a small figure down among the rocks caught his eye.

The remembrance of 'Graves' vanished, and he leaned far over the rocks, watching with curious fascination the fluttering of the loose folds of the gown in the wind.

It was a girl, her yellow hair blown about her shoulders, her hands clasped about her knee, her eyes fixed upon the sea as they had been upon the day that her mother found her there.

"I wonder how the devil she got there!" muttered Morgan. "I don't suppose—Good Heavens! it is Olga!"

He had changed his position slightly, and had seen that exquisite profile, with the wonderful eyes gazing straight ahead. He held his breath and stood there, absorbed, tense as an artist stands, soul-rapt.

The blood rushed to his face for a moment, and then left him almost ghastly. His strong white teeth met in the end of his cigar. He could not have told whether it was a minute or an hour that he had stood there, when suddenly, without seeming to give any consideration to what he should do, he threw his cigar away, and catching hold of one of the great projecting rocks, he swung himself over and dropped lightly on one of the huge boulders below him. Then, very carefully, he made his way toward her.

She sat still and motionless but for the movement made by the wind in her hair and dress, and Morgan stood there beside her looking down, not wishing to startle her, and yet not knowing how to avoid it.

Then at last, in a tone that was scarcely more than the voice of the wind, he said,—

"Olga!"

He had not meant to say that. He had never called her Olga before, but the name had slipped from him unaware.

She turned her head and looked up at him.

It was there, the scar, livid and ghastly; but, somehow he did not seem to shrink from it as he had done upon that other occasion. He thought she would cry out, but she did nothing of the kind. She looked at him steadily for a

moment, then said, as quietly as he had spoken,—

"Why have you come here? How have you come here?"

"I came to find the author of 'Graves,'" he answered. "Somehow, I knew that it would be you."

"But why—why?" she cried, a faint passion traceable in her voice. "Surely I have borne enough, suffered enough! Could you not let me be?"

He seated himself upon a rock at her feet, and placed his hat where the wind would not blow it away, before replying to her. He was singularly handsome, and he had never looked more so than at that moment when the wind dishevelled his beautiful blonde hair, and that flush of suppressed excitement was in his cheeks that were almost too fair and delicately tinted to belong to a man.

"No, Olga," he answered, gently, "I could not let you be. The author of 'Graves' has no right to be let alone. Do you remember the command of Heaven, that your light shall not be hid under a bushel?"

"And it is for that you have come?"

"Yes."

"Only?"

"Only that."

She sighed. Even if he had been in an analytical mood, it is doubtful if he could have told whether with relief or disappointment.

There was a long silence between them. He was gazing up into her face, and her eyes were directed over his head far out over the surging billows. She brought them down with a start after a little while and looked into his own.

"Tell me—what I want to know," she said, with peculiar pauses between her words.

He changed colour before replying.

"You mean about—Neil?"

She nodded.

"There is nothing to tell. He is just the same."

"His sight—"

The operation is to be performed next Wednesday."

She shivered slightly and looked away again. "I have not forgotten that you are Neil's wife," he said.

It seemed a strange thing for him to say, and his voice added to the impression that his words created; but she did not seem to observe.

"No," she said softly, the peculiar fascination of her voice making itself felt.

She offered no further remark, and after the pause had become painful, he said,—

"Is there nothing further that you wish to know about—him?"

"What is there?" she asked, quietly. "What can there be? He has gone out of my life as the sun dies out of the day."

"But the sun will rise on the morrow and there will be another day."

"Not for me. It is a new day—a new life. The old one is dead, dead beyond resurrection."

"Then you no longer love—him?"

There was something so singular in the tone that her eyes wandered back to him again.

"I did not say that," she said, slowly.

He flushed painfully.

"No, you did not say it."

"What are you going to do?" she asked, suddenly, the old, faint passion coming back into her voice. "Shall you tell Neil that you have seen me? Shall you make the sacrifice of my life a useless one? Shall you put upon me another burden even greater than the one I have borne?"

He did not reply at once. He held her eyes in a long, curious gaze which she could not quite understand. Then he said, slowly,—

"I shall do whatever you—wish me to do; that is, whatever is best for you."

She leaned forward slightly, her eyes growing larger. A cold feeling that he could not analyze crept over him.

"Do you mean that?" she asked.

"Don't I always mean what I say?"

"Then you must understand that it is best for me to remain where I am without his knowledge. You must understand what it would be to give up this little home again after I have sought the

country over to find it. You must see what it would be to go out of this and seek another. I can't afford it. There is my bread to earn."

"Then you are—not rich?"

"No; poor—very poor."

"And you have given up everything to him?"

"Everything."

"You loved him so well?"

"Ah!" she cried, passionately, "I would have done that even if I had not loved him. What right had I to old Dacre Hartley's money? I had not grown up from childhood with the thought that it belonged to me. I never knew that he had it until I heard that conversation beneath the trees. I only took that means of giving to him what rightfully belonged to him, and I do not regret it—I do not regret it."

There was another pause between them, then leaning up, he put his hand upon hers.

"Olga," he said gently, "will you talk to me freely and allow me to talk to you, and then let me advise you? I promise you that I will speak to you only as I would to my own sister. Will you let me do it? I will not forget that you are Neil's wife."

(To be continued.)

A FIGHT FOR A WIFE.

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(Continued from page 33.)

"I think my meaning can be made clear in a few words," he said. "Robert Leigh was your friend, and Gerald was even engaged to Miss Stormont, when this crash came. That Mr. Leigh was led into these transactions mainly through the representations of the man he looked upon as your confidential agent is clear, and thus to a certain extent, you are morally responsible for his ruin. Now, which do you consider the better course? Shall I cause Nesbitt to be arrested, and risk any attempt he may make to implicate you; or now that you know your associate's real character, will you not rather restore the fortune which once belonged to your old friend?"

"I presume," Mr. Stormont, said coldly, "you do not expect me to take your bare word that Mr. Nesbitt is a scoundrel?"

"Certainly not; but if you will allow me to meet him here, to-morrow evening at eight o'clock, you shall learn for yourself what manner of man he is."

Mr. Stormont readily accepted the proposal. Though he himself had been engaged in nothing which the law would consider criminal, yet some of his recent transactions would scarcely bear investigation, and much as he admired Lancelot, he was perfectly willing to sacrifice him a thousand times over, in order to secure his own safety.

CHAPTER IX.

Just as Lancelot entered Mr. Stormont's house, a cab drew up a few doors away, and Horace Merton, followed by two companions got out. At the same time a decently dressed man descended from the seat, and to him Horace turned.

"Dick," he said, "wait here with the driver. If your evidence be required I will send for you, though I think these gentlemen will finish your friend off between them."

"All right, Mr. Merton," Dick answered with a grin, "but if I can be of any service, never mind Lem's threats, I'll do seven years cheerfully to help the young gentleman," and he meant it.

Horace nodded and accompanied by the other two approached the house and rang the bell.

The servant to whom he handed his card, re-appeared shortly with the intimation that her master would receive them in the library.

Horace was the first to enter.

"Good-evening, Mr. Stormont. Ah, Mr. Nesbitt, this is fortunate; my friends here are

particularly anxious to make your acquaintance. Allow me—Mr. John Gadd, Mr. William Swallow," and he waved his hand airily towards these gentlemen.

Mr. Stormont bowed, but Lancelot took not the slightest notice. He cowered in his chair, white and trembling, just, as John Gadd afterwards described it, like an animal, hunted down.

"Excuse me, Stormont," Horace continued, "this is a most irregular proceeding; but these gentlemen desired an interview with you, and learning that I had the honour of your acquaintance, they begged me most urgently to introduce them."

Mr. Stormont bowed again to his visitors, and muttered some unintelligible reply, to which no one paid the slightest attention.

The two strangers were curiously ill-assorted. John Gadd was a short, thick-set man, with enormous breadth across the chest, and massive limbs. His beard was iron-grey; his face rugged and weather-stained, while his eyes were sharp, deep-set, and piercing. His companion, on the contrary, was tall and loosely-built, and had an ungainly appearance. His face wore an air of unusual gravity, and his eyes were large and solemn.

John Gadd was the first speaker.

"Mr. Stormont," he said, respectfully, but firmly, "I am a plain man, not well versed in the ways of gentlemen, so if I've done wrong in coming here, maybe you'll excuse me. Most of my life has been spent in California, and I'm more used to the pick and spade than aught else. But there is a purpose in our visit, I—that is William and me, want to tell you a little story."

He addressed himself exclusively to Mr. Stormont, apparently taking no notice of Lancelot, though he kept himself sedulously planted in front of the door.

"About five years ago," he continued, "there came to our camp, a smart, well-dressed young fellow, who like the rest of us, was out seeking for gold, and finding it a likely place, he pegged a claim and resolved to settle down. The lad wasn't much of a miner, but he had a handsome face and a smooth tongue, so that before long he was a pretty general favourite, especially at the saloons, where he was always ready to sing a good song or take a hand at cards."

"Matters went on in this way for about three months, when one day there came into the camp a young woman searching for Lemuel Norris. She was very thin and pale and looked dreadfully ill and half-starved. Her clothes were poor and nearly threadbare, and she appeared almost ready to faint with hunger. One of the boys took her to his hut, and gave her a square meal."

"That was John Gadd, sir," interrupted the other solemnly.

"Never mind that," said the short man, a trifle disconcerted by his companion's remark,—"at any rate he found out that this poor girl was Lemuel's wife, whom he had left to starve in San Francisco."

"To perish," echoed William gravely, "to die for want of a crust of bread."

"Poor thing," John Gadd continued, "she might almost as well have died in 'Frisco, for her husband did not want her. His handsome face grew ugly enough when he knew she had come, and he swore he would let her die in the street, but the boys—"

"Meaning John Gadd again, sir."

"The boys would not stand that, and he was forced to give her shelter at least. What went on in that house no one knew. Some said he beat her, and kept her without food; others believed he tried to kill her slowly with poison; but one morning we found he had left the camp with my bag of gold, and in his shanty we discovered the poor young thing clean out of her mind, and moaning and gibbering like an idiot."

The speaker paused and mopped his brow; then he added as an afterthought,

"That's my story, Mr. Stormont; now it's William's turn. Go on, William."

Thus adjured, the tall man shifted his feet, cleared his throat by means of a short cough, and began,—

"My name, sir, is Swallow—William Swallow. Though not a millionaire, like John Gadd, who could buy you and me out easily and not feel it, at one time and another I've saved a tidyish bit of money. I'm bound to tell you this, because it was for this money that Lemuel Norris came sneaking round after my daughter Mary. I never liked the youngster, and told the girl so. I said he was no account, but she wouldn't see it and was mad after him. At last I said, 'Now Mary, you've got to choose between your old father and this stranger, for mind me, lass, if you marry Lem Norris, you shall never touch a cent of my money.' Well, 'twas all no good. She believed in the skunk, and went away and got married. I gave her a good outfit, and as long as that lasted it was like living in the garden of Eden. After that gave out the trouble began. First he wanted her to write for a fresh supply, and when she refused he wrote himself, but he got nothing out of me. Then they disappeared altogether, till John Gadd discovered who the girl at Horse-shoe Gulch was, and sent for me. She didn't know, poor lass, but we took her back to 'Frisco and paid a skillful doctor to attend her. After a long time her reason returned, and then we wandered around quietly from place to place until she was strong enough to bear the journey to England."

"It was like this, you see," broke in the other, "we heard Lem had slipped off to the old country and we talked it over, William and me, a good deal. What I said was, we wanted a sight of that young man again, very badly, and William allowed that was true. Besides, we thought Lemuel would probably be up to some new dodge and so we determined to take a long holiday, and introduce ourselves to him afresh."

The silence, when John Gadd ceased speaking was painful.

Horace Merton, who had not previously learnt the whole of the wretched story, stood in speechless disgust. And this, forsooth, was the miserable creature who aspired to supplant Gerald Leigh!

The stockbroker sat dazed, with his eyes fixed on the ground.

Lancelot, the clever, fascinating Lancelot, sat huddled up in his chair; large beads of perspiration trickling down his ashen cheeks.

This was Nemesis in an unexpected shape. That black chapter in his life he fondly hoped was closed for ever, and now—he groaned involuntarily. All his schemings and plots were of no avail; the base ingratitude to his preserver; the ruin he had brought on so many happy homes—all had been fruitless. And he had nearly reached the pinnacle of success! As he thought of Esther he ground his teeth in impatient rage. There would be no mercy for him he knew, once again he was thrown back into the crowd—an outcast and a beggar!

Meanwhile the two men who had effected this change stood gazing at him as if fascinated. Presently the short man loosened the heavy belt which he wore round his waist, and William produced from the capacious pocket of his loose coat a leathern thong.

The sight of these weapons brought back the stockbroker's power of speech. "Surely," he gasped, "you do not intend to murder the man."

"No, Mr. Stormont," answered John Gadd deliberately, "we are not going to murder him, though if we had your friend at Horse-shoe Gulch, I would not give sixpence for his life."

William answered nothing, only he gripped his cow-hide more tenaciously, and fastened his gaze upon his hapless son-in-law. Presently he crossed the room, lifted the wretched man from his chair, and literally shook him. Then the leathern thong described a series of evolutions, such as Horace had never before witnessed. So shrewdly delivered were the merciless blows, that Lancelot, alias Lemuel, shrieked with agony. Finally William's arm grew tired, and flinging his bleeding victim into a corner, he replaced the strap in his pocket, without a word.

All this while the other three had remained passive spectators of the scene, but now Horace thought it time to interfere. "Mr. Gadd," he said firmly, "the man has suffered enough; your partner has a strong arm."

"Yes!" responded the miner, glancing at the piteous object, "William hits mighty hard;" and he buckled the belt round his waist with a sigh of regret.

Picking Lancelot up, he said sternly, "Mark me, young shaver, we have only half done with you. William has spoiled you for my turn, as this gentleman truly remarks; but take my advice and don't let me see your ugly face again. If you are wise you will pack up your traps, and decamp without loss of time."

"Excuse me," interrupted Horace, "your advice is sound for more than one reason, but unluckily Mr. Nesbitt is not in a position to avail himself of it. At present his movements are being watched by the police, and should they suspect him of preparing for flight he would most certainly be arrested. That is," he added, pointedly, "unless Mr. Stormont pleases to favour his escape."

It was a bold stroke, but politic, for Lancelot instantly suspected the stockbroker of being the author of all his misfortunes, and he darted such a look of ferocious rage at his late associate that Mr. Stormont capitulated immediately.

"As far as I am concerned," he exclaimed, looking significantly at Horace, "Mr. Nesbitt is free to go wherever he may prefer, I have no wish to detain him."

"Then, gentlemen," said Horace, "I presume Mr. Nesbitt will follow your advice, and as we have already trespassed largely on our host's time we had better wish him good-night."

Lancelot, still smarting from his terrible castigation, shambled off, with downcast head, followed by the two trusty comrades, and lead of all by Horace himself, who recognised clearly that his object was effected, for he knew that the stockbroker would not dare to go back on his word.

L'ENVOI.

EIGHTEEN months had elapsed since Robert Leigh's death, and a string of carriages was drawn up in front of a quiet West-end church. A little knot of people loitered round the open door, for though the morning was cold the sun was shining, and a double wedding is a sight not to be witnessed every day.

Presently there arose a little hum of excitement as Gerald Leigh, with a glad light on his handsome face, led out his winsome bride; and when Horace, proud and happy appeared, supporting Gerald's beautiful sister, the hum developed into a hearty demonstration, and the carriages drove away amidst a volley of cheers.

Whatever the reason might have been, Reuben Stormont had greatly altered during the last few months. He treated Gerald with marked kindness, and when he learned that Marie had promised her hand to Horace Merton, he insisted that the wedding should take place on the same day as Esther's, and from his own house.

"My dear," he said gently, when the girl offered an objection, "remember it was partly my fault your father suffered so cruelly; let me make all the amends in my power."

"You must admit, Sir Thomas," said Dr. McCarthy to his fellow guest, as later in the day they sat lazily over their wine, "that Mr. Stormont, whatever his faults may have been, has behaved most honourably towards both your godson and his sister," and the worthy knight, chuckling inwardly, assented to the remark.

It was just as well, perhaps, that only a very few suspected the real truth.

[THE END.]

THEY have a queer method of judicial procedure in parts of the kingdom of Siam. In the absence of trustworthy witnesses, the learned judge orders the two contestants to dive in deep water. He who is able to remain below the surface the longer time is the winner of the suit. If he remains down altogether, he is considered to be so good that he has betaken himself to heaven.

FACETIÆ.

ETHEL KNOX: "You are a man after my own heart." Jack Ash: "Darling!" Ethel Knox: "But you won't get it."

SHE (doubtfully): "How can you tell she's a real lady?" He: "Why, she asked me if her hat were on straight."

MANY a young man has a great future ahead of him. The great difficulty is that it persists in keeping there.

POLITE B T ABSENT-MINDED BATHER (to friend up to his neck in the water): "Ah! Jones; very glad to see you. Won't you sit down?"

THE SAME HORSE.—Willis: "Brown says he has a horse for sale." Wallace: "I don't doubt it; I sold him one the other day."

"THAT young Antonio Fitzgushley just dotes on me, papa." "Does he? Well, for goodness' sake, give him an antidote."

FOOTLIGHTS: "Rather poor house to-night, eh?" Manager: "Yes; poor, but honest. No free passes were given to-night."

"LET'S go into this restaurant and get something to eat." "But I'm not hungry." "That's no matter; you will be before you get anything."

DORA: "How many times did you refuse Jack before you accepted him?" Ethel: "Only once. He seemed so discouraged I was afraid to try it again."

BIZZ: "I used to belong to a theatrical company myself." Futlite: "What part did you take?" Bizz: "Oh, I took it all; I was treasurer."

"MRS. BROWNSMITH is a woman of very simple tastes." "Yes; I noticed that when—" "You have never met her?" "No; but I was introduced to her husband."

STOUT ACTRESS (in comic opera costume): "What did you think of me in the second act?" "You were immense. In fact, I should call it a case of *multum in parvo*."

BOSCOMBE. Visitor: "Do you call this a band of picked musicians?" Bandmaster: "Ach, dot vos so; I bick 'em mineself." Visitor: "Well, then, you picked them before they were ripe."

He was an applicant for a position as street car conductor. "What are your qualifications for the place?" asked the superintendent. "I used to work in a sardine-packing establishment."

ART NOTE.—Mother: "Our son is going to be a great artist. Just think of it—he has sold his first picture for five guineas." Father: "No wonder. I had a five-guinea frame put on it."

HEARD AT THE WEDDING-BREAKFAST.—Mr. Fife: "It's funny about bridal pairs. They are not like other pairs at all." Aunt Kate: "Why not?" Mr. Fife: "They're softest when they are green."

"CLARA, I'm engaged to be married already, and I've only been here two days." "You sweet thing! Who is the happy man?" "Dear me, how unfortunate! He forgot to give me his card."

"I LIKE you very much, Charlie, but I couldn't marry you. I don't think we could live happily together." "But, my dear Maude, reflect. After we were married I wouldn't be home very much."

"YES," said Mrs. Gummy, in reply to her visitor's question, "yes, it is a trifle hard on the kuickerbockers to let the boys slide down the banisters, but, then, it saves considerable wear and tear on the stair-carpet."

"ARE your children doing well at school?" was asked of a fashionable woman. "Very well, particularly Clarence. I have great hopes of him. Why, I can't read a word he writes; I think he is going to be literary."

PROUD YOUNG WOMAN: "No; I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man in the world." Fond Youth (rejected, but not crushed): "You can bet your sweet life you wouldn't. I'd have too good an assortment to select from."

GENTLEMAN (who has come aboard after a very jolly dinner): "Er—Captain, how many hours is it to the Isle of Wight?" Captain: "Depends altogether on the boat you take. This one goes to Dublin."

A LINCOLNSHIRE curate proposed to a young lady, but was rejected. His feelings were further hurt when a widow sent him the following text to preach from—"You ask and receive not, because you ask a miss."

MRS. STAGGERS: "You would be much happier if you would but learn to say 'no.'" Mr. Staggers: "I know I would have been much happier if you had said 'no' on a certain occasion."

SCENE: A country residence. Two burglars discovered at work.—"Wot'll I do with this burglar alarm, Bill; bring it along?" asks burglar number one.—Second burglar: "Yes, slip it in the bag; we can get something for it."

TAILOR: "You promised me faithfully yesterday morning that you would call in and settle for that suit last night, if it rained pitchforks." Gus De Smith: "Yes, I know; but it didn't rain pitchforks."

"I DIDN'T think it was fair," said Bobbie, after his big brother had lost the running race. "Jack was ahead almost all the time, but they gave the prize to a man that was ahead only a second just at the end."

MABEL: "Do you know Nellie and I have eyes of almost exactly the same colour. We've just been comparing them." Jacques: "Pardon me, that's quite impossible." Mabel: "How impossible?" Jacques: "Your eyes are incomparable!"

"JACK: "Maud wants to know why you shun her company now?" Tom: "Well, the fact is, I'm hard up." Jack: "I'll tell her, and you needn't shun her any more." Tom (brightening up): "By Jove, do you think so?" Jack: "Yes. She'll shun you."

OVERHEARD at a Belgian livery stable.—Master: "You must be very polite to the customers." New coachman: "Yes, sir." Master: "And honest. For example, what would you do if you found a pocket-book in the brougham with fifty thousand francs in it?" New coachman: "I should do nothing; I should live on my means."

AN English lawyer, Mr. William Willis, was once rather amusingly interrupted in a speech. In addressing a political meeting, Mr. Willis found an opportunity of referring to Charles Dickens's character Barkis, and of exclaiming, "Barkis is willin'!" "No, no," shouted a working-man in the audience; "it ain't 'Barkis is willin'', but 'Willis is barkin'!"

AUNT PENELOPE (who has testamentary powers): "Do you know, Edith, I sometimes fancy baby will be like me." Edith (astonished into candour): "Like you, Aunt Penelope? Dear me! I hope not." Aunt Penelope: "You hope not! And pray why, Edith?" Edith (suddenly recollecting Aunt P.'s banking account): "Oh, good looks are frequently such a snare, you know, aunty."

HOSPITAL Saturday at Brighton. "Well, old fellow, did the pretty tambourinists get much out of you?" "Not they; directly I went out I picked up a pebble, and whenever the girls bothered me I showed it to them." "What for?" "Why, of course, to let them know I was stone-broke." "Hah! I expect most of them thought it was to signify that your heart was flinty."

PRETTY GIRL: "You advertised for a typewriter." Business Man (admiringly): "Yes. The wages are twenty—I mean twenty-five shillings—a week, the hours short, and the work light. Anyone with the slightest knowledge of type-writing can fill the position. I am not at all critical. But my correspondence is a little behind, and the work should commence at once. Take that seat—!" Pretty Girl: "Thank you, but I do not understand type-writing. I am seeking a position for my brother, who is waiting outside, and I will send him in. Thank you ever so much. You are very kind, and it is such a comfort to know that anyone can fill the position, and no experience is required, for he hasn't had any."

SOCIETY.

It is now understood that the projected match between the Czarowitch and Princess Sibyl is "off."

A CLUB is being formed in London for the exclusive benefit of young ladies who reach or exceed a certain fixed standard of height.

THE Czar while at Copenhagen made no secret of his profound dislike to the German language, which he knows, but persistently declines to speak, or listen to.

THE Queen has invited the Dowager Duchess of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha to come to England on a visit to her Majesty, but she is not now likely to do so before next summer.

THE Grand Duke Serge is the third brother of the Czar, and his wife is the Queen's granddaughter, Princess Elizabeth of Hesse. The Grand Duke Paul is the fourth and youngest brother, who was married in 1889 to Princess Alexandra of Greece, eldest daughter of King George and Queen Olga, and she died about a year afterwards.

THE Queen of Denmark received a lovely present on her birthday this year from the Czar, in the shape of the rarest and fairest blooms that could be got together for money, which were tied together with silk ribbon fastened with a diamond clasp, and accompanied with a brooch made of a large sapphire surrounded with diamonds.

THE Duchess of York has kindly become patroness of a bazaar to be held in December at Middlesborough, by the ladies of Yorkshire and Durham, to raise a sum for the completion of a proposed Mission to Seamen Institute at Stockton, a matter in which the Duke and Duchess of York both take the greatest interest.

DUKE ALFRED OF SAXE-COBURG AND GOtha is to be in England during the first fortnight of November, and will spend a week at Balmoral with the Queen, and a few days at Sandringham with the Prince and Princess of Wales. The Duchess is to stay in Roumania until after the accouchement of her daughter, and it is expected that she will spend most of the winter at St. Petersburg.

THE little Duke of Albany, who has hitherto been a fairly healthy child, has lately shown signs of delicacy which, though happily not serious, must necessarily occasion the deepest anxiety to his devoted mother. He is a winsome little lad, and his mother has found in him a bright little companion in her somewhat lonely life.

THE Queen's dahlias are all real natives of Mexico, and they are the glory of the Royal gardens in the autumn. Each season the Royal gardeners produce improved varieties to please the taste of Her Majesty. The geraniums are of the very finest old strains, and the past long, hot summer has caused them to bloom more beautifully than ever.

DURING the German Emperor's visit to Austria and Hungary his Majesty seized every opportunity of wearing his new hunting-costume, which was designed by himself. It consists of a bluish-grey tunic, with a short cloak of the same material, both garments having green facings and broad epaulettes. The Emperor has round his waist a broad belt of green leather, from which hangs a huge hunting-knife, the handle mounted with an Imperial crown of gold. The Emperor wears very high lacquered boots, with gold spurs, and his Tyrolean hat is of grey felt, edged with green, and adorned with an enormous plume of feathers, which quivers at every step.

THE Queen has taken the greatest interest in the arrangements of the Duke and Duchess of York, and it is her Majesty's wish that their Royal Highnesses should take a very prominent social position, and in every way help to lighten the labours of the Prince and Princess of Wales, which the Queen has of late years, known to be very heavy. Her Majesty is much pleased and touched by the enthusiasm and loyalty for the young couple so unstintingly shown wherever they go, and the Queen has given many a wise and womanly counsel to the Royal bride, who has the deepest reverence and affection for her august grandmother-in-law.

STATISTICS.

In England the average weight of men is 155 pounds; that of women is 122 pounds.

In the world there are 4,965 daily newspapers published, of which no fewer than 1,759, or more than a third, are issued in the United States.

BETWEEN the Imperial library at St. Petersburg and the British Museum there is not much difference. In the British museum there are about 1,500,000 volumes. The Royal library of Munich has now something over 900,000, but this includes many pamphlets; the Royal library at Berlin contains 800,000 volumes; the library at Copenhagen 310,000; the library at Dresden 500,000; the University library at Göttingen, Germany, 600,000. The Royal library at Vienna has 400,000 volumes, and the University library in the same city 370,000 volumes. At Budapest the University library has 300,000 books; the corresponding library at Cracow nearly the same number, and at Prague 205,000.

GEMS.

It is but the littleness of man that seeth no greatness in trifles.

It is not so much the being exempt from faults as the having overcome them, that is an advantage to us.

In matters of conscience, first thoughts are best; in matters of prudence, last thoughts are best.

THE man who will not execute his resolutions when they are fresh upon him can have no hope from them afterwards; they will be dissipated, lost, stifled in the bustle of the world, or swamped in the slough of indolence.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

BACHELOR'S PUDDINGS.—Quarter pound grated bread, quarter pound of currants, quarter pound of apples, two ounces of sugar, a little nutmeg, three eggs, a little essence of lemon. Put the bread in a basin. Peel and chop the apples, wash and dry the currants, and stir both in; add the sugar, nutmeg and lemon. Mix well. Beat up the eggs very well; stir them in. Pour into a well buttered mould, and cover with a buttered paper, and steam two hours.

MUSHROOM KETCHUP.—Basket of mushrooms; salt, cloves, mustard-seed, allspice, black pepper, ginger. Wash and pick the mushrooms, and sprinkle with salt in proportion of a quarter pound of salt to three pounds of mushrooms. Stir occasionally for two or three days. Squeeze out the juice, and to each quart of juice add half a teaspoonful each of cloves and mustard, and of allspice, black pepper, and ginger three quarters of a teaspoonful each. Put all into a covered jar and allow it to heat gently till it reaches boiling point. Leave it so for a fortnight, and strain through muslin, and bottle for use. Should it show any appearance of spoiling, boil up once more with a little spice and salt.

COOKIES.—One and a half pounds of flour, one ounce of German yeast, two ounces of lard or butter, two eggs, quarter pound of sugar, about one and three quarter breakfast cups of milk. Mix the yeast and one teaspoonful of the sugar together, add a little lukewarm milk to it to mix it; add half a pound of the flour and the rest of the milk lukewarm, cover it with a cloth, and set it to rise in a warm place for half an hour. Then mix in a large basin the rest of the flour, the butter, sugar, eggs; pour the yeast in and give it all a good beating, and set it to rise again for an hour and a half. Then take it and shape it into buns, and put them on a greased pan in the oven for half an hour. Then brush them over with milk and sugar, and put them back to brown for a few minutes. It must all be kept warm and in a warm place the whole time.

MISCELLANEOUS.

THE Medical Council of St. Petersburg has under consideration a project to fix doctors' fees. It is intended to divide doctors into three classes, according to their patients' capacity, and again to divide towns into three categories, according to population. In accordance with this classification there will be nine fees, ranging from about a shilling to a pound.

THE Sheriffs of London annually pay into the British Exchequer six horseshoes with the proper number of nails as rent for a piece of ground in the parish of St. Clement. In 1214 this lot was rented from the Crown by a blacksmith to build a shop on, and afterwards the property came into the hands of the City Corporation at the same rental. The horseshoes and nails have been annually paid ever since the day mentioned.

SHORT sight is hereditary in families. As a general rule, the inhabitants of towns are much more liable to it than persons living in the country, and students and literary men are the most liable of all. While in the Foot Guards, consisting of nearly 10,000 men, not half-a-dozen men were discharged, nor a dozen recruits rejected, on account of this imperfection, in a space of 20 years; in one college at Oxford no fewer than 32 short-sighted men were met with out of 127.

A HUNDRED years ago Mar Lodge was famous for its goat's milk, then considered a sovereign cure for half the ills that flesh is heir to. The Lord Eife of that remote period wrote: "I intend to stay some days at Mar Lodge, as I intend to drink the goat whey;" and later, after apparently suffering from overwork in the House of Lords, he breathes the plaintive aspiration: "I wish I were at Mar Lodge to drink goat whey for ten days." The Duke of Eife has a big herd of goats, but probably their milk is not credited with so much virtue to-day.

THE men and women of the Cree tribe of America dress alike, and can be distinguished only by the ornamentation of their leggings, that of the men being vertical and that of the women horizontal. The babies are put into bags lined with moss, which are ornamented with beads. The bag closes at the neck, where there is a loop for slinging the papoose. The mother carries the child on her back in this way, and, when she enters a house or wigwam, she hangs it on a nail. The women ride on saddles astride like the men, and the saddle has a horn in front and behind. The papoose is usually suspended from the pommel, under the eye of his mother.

THE Empress Eugenie has much aged of late, and the look of settled melancholy left by the bitter sorrows of her life has deepened upon her still handsome face. Nothing could exceed the warmth of her affection for the Queen, whose unfailing goodness has so lightened the burden of her long exile, and who is able from her own sad experience, to fully sympathise with her in her undying grief for the loss of husband and son. To the Princess Beatrice the widowed Empress is also greatly devoted, and one of the few pleasures of her lonely life is to watch the progress of the little people who have been springing up around the Princess since her marriage with Prince Henry of Battenberg.

THE simplest of Indian Royal titles is that of "rajah," which is literally "king," but is applied even to a petty princeling. A maharajah is a "great king"—usually a ruler who retains some degree of actual sovereignty, and is not compelled to look to the British official resident at his court for authority to act. The feminine of rajah is rani, better known in the Anglo-Indian form of ranee, and this is the proper designation of a reigning Hindoo princess or queen. A begum is any princess or other lady of rank and wealth—the word being the Anglo-Indian term for the Hindoostanee begam, a "princess." Nawab is our familiar "nabob," which has its origin in the same Hindoostanee word. Officially, a nawab is a deputy-governor or viceroy.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

B. Y.—A deformed quadruped.
SOPHIA.—Apply benzine to the stain.
BONNIE.—Employ a respectable solicitor at once.
HAROLD.—Very much the same as for the navy.
SID.—A week's notice should be given apparently.
YODDIE.—The first lucifer match was made in 1829.
E. HOUFE, York.—We should certainly think you had good ground for proceedings.
COPPIN.—The custody of the children belongs to him of right.
SARAH JANE.—A divorce would not be granted for desertion alone.
BEATRICE.—Call in a tuner; he will soon make it all right.
STEWIE.—Your best course would be to at once employ a solicitor.
DOUBTFUL.—Pay at once, otherwise heavy expenses can be added.
TINY TIM.—We do not think you will grow much more; you are evidently "set."
A MARTYR.—The only cure is to have the teeth extracted at once by a good dentist.
L. S.—We know of no institution of the kind you mention.
A COCKNEY.—A master can require his men to work on Bank Holiday.
IGNORANCE.—The saying "Age before honesty," took its rise from the Latin *Seniores priores*, "the older first."
E. G.—If the wife does not make a will the property goes to her husband.
CONSTANT READER.—Twelve years' undisputed possession gives a holding title.
AN OLD READER.—We cannot decide the point for you; it is a matter of local regulation.
QUEERIE.—Meriden, Warwickshire, is regarded as practically the centre of England.
ALBERT.—A constable of any rank gets a pension of two-thirds salary when he has served twenty-five years.
JULIA.—Whalebone can be softened by putting it for a time in hot water—not boiling.
DOUBTFUL MARGARET.—It will be quite legal for you to marry again under the circumstances you mention.
B. A.—School Boards were first elected in 1873, the Act having passed in previous year.
BILLY.—The organ is far sweeter than the harmonium, but an instrument without stops is worthless.
ISABEL.—While the wife knows that her husband is alive she cannot legally marry again.
DELIA.—Longfellow is the author of the poem you mean, the title of which is "Resignation."
T. R.—Nothing that is your wife's can be taken for allment to your children either legitimate or illegitimate.
ALEC.—Stay at home and seek your gold in the assiduous devotion of your time to legitimate trade or business.
RICHARD.—You can obtain information at the office of the Chamber of Commerce, Exchange, Stephenson-place.
LOUIRA.—If the mark is a mole, nothing can remove it without leaving a more unsightly scar than the mark itself.
REYNOLDS.—We would advise you to go out to Canada, where such knowledge as you possess would make farming pay.
EDWIN.—Take up machine construction and drawing; you may get in that all of the other subjects you are likely to require.
PUZZLED TENANT.—The tenant having destroyed the boiler must replace it of course, or landlord may do it at tenant's expense.
N. C.—Your relative at his age could not enter the navy except as a non-combatant; that is an engineer, stoker, or artificer.
AN OLD SUBSCRIBER.—The Victoria Cross carries with it a pension of £10 for privates, but is purely honorary for officers.
PUZZLED ONE.—The question is put when standing before a portrait of his son, not of himself; you have got the puzzle mixed.
A. C.—As you are a weekly tenant, you can be required to leave at a week's notice, without reference to the state of the crops in your garden.
EMMY.—You should send the instrument to the maker for the necessary repairs. We fear you could not well do it yourself.
OSCAR.—To obtain Letters of Administration the simplest way is to go to your local county court and state the circumstances. Letters will then be granted you at a trifling cost.
ADMIRER OF THE "LONDON READER."—Time, aided by the continued use of soapstone and hot water, will dim the tatooing. There is said to be no way of removing it.

TOMMY.—The master is one entirely within the discretion of the Judge before whom the case would come.
MORGAN.—There is probably some constitutional difficulty as to the foundation of the trouble. Go and consult some physician.
R. R. S.—England alone could not raise enough corn to feed its own population if all land suitable for corn-growing were laid down to corn.
CHARLIE.—Scotland's three "honours" are the Crown, sword, and sceptre, in the Royal Regalia of Scotland, now shown in Edinburgh Castle.
REGGY.—You have got a William IV. shilling, not at all scarce, and worth no more than twelve pence. Gullielmus is the Latinised form of William.
B. C.—If the lodger's rooms were taken by the week a week's notice is enough, although the rent may have been paid at longer intervals.
INQUIRER.—The Post Office Savings Bank is the safest of all depositories for money, because the Government is bound to repay all the deposits with interest.
ARCHIE.—You can see it at Somerset House on payment of 1s. fee. The trustee need not show it you unless he chooses.
LIZZIE.—We cannot suggest a remedy. You should take it to one of the waterproofing shops. If anything can be done they will do it.

TEACH YOUR DAUGHTERS HOW TO WORK.

MOTHERS who have daughters dear,
 Daughters fair and rosy,
 Hear the lesson that I give;
 Pray don't deem me prosy;
 If you'd see their future lives
 Full of heartfelt beauty,
 Take those well-meant words to heart,
 Don't neglect this duty:
 Teach them how to bake and brew,
 Mary, Grace and Mabel;
 How to make the wholesome bread,
 How to set a table.
 What more pleasing, home-like sight
 Than each household fairy,
 Working under "mother's" wing,
 Mabel, Grace or Mary.
 Ah! a man should cherish well
 Such a handy maiden—
 When he takes her to his heart
 And his home well laden
 With the products of his hands,
 Ah! he has a treasure;
 For he knows his dear young wife
 Well employs her leisure.
 White as any lilies fair
 Are the hands of Mary,
 As she pats the biscuits light,
 Deft as any fairy.
 See her tripping here and there,
 Getting father's dinner;
 Lucky is the happy man
 Who has "hope" to win her.
 In this ever busy world
 Many changes greet us;
 Sorrows mixed with earthly joys
 Often come to meet us.
 Let us teach our children then,
 Truths of useful beauty—
 Then each mother well may say,
 I have done my duty.

M. M.

DAVID.—The matter is one entirely within the discretion of the magistrates who can order all or one of the sons to pay what he thinks right.
HAL.—As there are about fifty applications for every vacancy, you can judge what your chance of success, even with all possible guidance, is likely to be.
HANNAH.—We are quite as much in doubt about it as you are. No one can give you the information you require except the doctors who advised you or were present at the operation.
PATTIE.—Having washed and dried the curtains, colour some water with coffee grounds, and with this tinted water make the starch, which should be well cooked and thick.
GIPSY JACK.—It is within the discretion of the local licensing justices to fix the hours for opening on Sunday, either at 12.30 to close at 2.30, or one to close at three o'clock.
CLEMENT.—If your violin be a genuine Stradavarius it is very valuable; but there are so many spurious ones of the kind for sale that we advise you to show it to some extensive dealer in musical instruments.
FLIPPERTY GIBNET.—Heritable property is houses and land, and a father can by a will dispose of his whole heritable estate as he thinks fit, giving it all to strangers if he likes.
STREEDMAN.—A grocer or other tradesmen holding an "off" licence is not obliged to close his ordinary business premises during hours prohibited under the beer license, but he must not sell beer.
EMMOND.—There is no "public executioner," nor is any pay for executions made by the Government. The persons employed as hangmen are employed by the sheriffs, and are paid by them.

PRISCILLA.—You have not informed us as to whether the woollen is coloured or white. In either case plenty of clean warm water would have prevented the stain.

BERTRAM.—The cost of a copy of a will is 6d. per folio of ninety words for an ordinary copy, and 9d. a folio for a certified copy (for production in court). Address, the Registrar-General, Somerset House.

HERBERT.—Legally you are entitled to receive back your watch without payment of any kind, and would get it if you sued the custodian for it; but it is cheaper to halve the loss with the pawnbroker, paying him half the sum he gave the thief.

POOR ADA.—A cure for perspiration is something that no judicious person will seek after, unless it may proceed from weakness, in which the use of tonics is indicated. To check healthful perspiration is often the cause of very serious illness.

DORRIS.—There are no assisted or free passages either to New Zealand or any other Colony; meantime, and taking all incidental expenses into account, it will cost you at least twenty pounds from time you start from here until you get a situation there.

Z. Y.—Not much skill is necessary, because full instructions are given with the machines which you must possess, but like many another thing that was once good, so many have gone into it that there is little left for those who are now thinking of going.

CAROLINE.—The cause of your hair falling so much is probably due to some constitutional weakness, and you need some kind of tonic internally, as well as local applications. The best advice we can give you is to consult some physician.

MARTHA.—It is not imperative that the bride should take household linen with her; but much depends upon circumstances, and a supply of such things can only be of service, as a bachelor household is certain to stand in need of them.

CHRISTIE.—To make ginger snaps, take 1 lb. flour, 2 oz. lard, 1 oz. sugar, 1 lb. treacle, 1 teaspoon soda, 1 teaspoon ginger. Put the flour, sugar, soda and ginger in a bowl. Melt the treacle and lard together, stir all in among the flour. Knead it well and roll out thinly. Cut with a small cutter and put in the oven till ready.

S. L.—If you can prove the rats the nuisance you say they are, and that your landlord refused to do anything to exterminate them notwithstanding your repeated complaints to him, then you can leave the premises; but remember, there must be no doubt about the proof, or of your having made complaint.

ALICE.—It is imperatively required that the individuals sitting at the examination should be so far apart from each other that they cannot possibly enter into communication or even overlook each other's work without being at once detected by the examiners or the inspectors set to watch them.

PHILIP.—What the Act requires is that there shall be no class fees charged in the free schools, nor charges made for cleansing or firing, as is sometimes attempted; Boards are not, however bound to provide either books, slates, copies, or pens though they are at liberty to do so if they like.

GUSKY.—Men who are forced to advertise for wives are usually of but little account. Really worthy men, those upon whom a woman would feel willing to bestow her heart and hand, usually have reasonable opportunities for marriage without resorting to advertising for them.

BELLA.—There is no incompatibility, necessarily, between literary work and good housekeeping. A lady engaged in literary pursuits need not neglect her household duties, if the latter be not too exacting. In fact, they might be made an agreeable diversion, the hard work about the house being performed by a faithful servant.

ANXIOUS MOTHER.—Warts are undoubtedly infectious, and in all probability your boy has had his stock of them from some companion; the best way to dispose of them is to pare their tops off with a keen razor, then touch them over each day once or twice with acetic acid; they are a low-lived and slow-lived thing, and soon break up and disappear under this treatment.

INQUIRITIVE.—If an employer is asked as to the character of a former servant who has been dishonest, he is justified in stating the truth, as a privileged communication between the inquirer and himself; but he is not justified otherwise in making statements to the injury of the servant, or referring to any term of imprisonment he may have served.

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